

## PROLOGUE

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OCTOBER 1825

Scores settled, wounds healed much as ever they would, the old trapper broke camp a month early and set off back to Fort Kiowa before snows got fierce. Weather sense said this winter'd come on quick.

Figured he'd stick it out just long enough to sell off his plews and make sure they got shipped down to St. Louis before the Missouri iced over. Then light out for high country where pelts'd grow lush and nobody'd be around to stumble on his traplines or fuss him otherwise.

But barely had he arrived at the trading post before he got cornered by a damn journalist name of Hubert Somebody, all the way from an Atlanta newspaper.

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The dandy asked who might he be. Surprised at the reply, he offered his hand and said, "An honor, Mr. Glass. Hugh wouldn't be short for Hubert, would it?"

"What's a Hubert," Hugh Glass said, ignoring the paw, not much on touching people.

"I thought we might have something in common," Hubert said.

"Likely not," old Glass said.

The dandy was pale and thin under a snapbrim hat and city overcoat buttoned to the neck. He wore stiff new military brogans so heavy he'd never keep up in the woods or swamps. Left and right boots built from the same last'd take forever to break in. Forever to dry.

"Moccasins," Glass said.

"Pardon?" Hubert said.

"Get you some. Shed them clodhoppers you're shod in. Blisters. Trenchfoot."

"I welcome wilderness advice, sir. Yours especially. Might we talk awhile? Came all this way for a fur trade story but these trappers seem unwilling to converse. Could make one or two famous if they'd allow it."

"Got my permission," Hugh Glass said.

"Can't write you up much more," the reporter said. "Who doesn't know about you and the bear? Your crawling all those miles to get your rifle and your knife and your revenge? I'm gratified to see you looking hale and hearty but that's no more than a paragraph. You already have your fame."

"Some's good, more's better," Glass said.

What he liked best about fame was the guide money he could make once keelboats were able to navigate upriver after spring breakup. He'd slouch against a cottonwood as Easterners disembarked. One look at his bear-clawed face, they knew they were facing the penny press legend. Quickest among them would ask was he available. By sundown he'd sign up two or three excursions, maybe an expedition or two.

Enough to tide him over. That night he'd circulate through the taverns and saloons with a bottle to share, prowling for experienced hands, see who was available or expected and signing on the best.

"But, see, there's a reason we call 'em newspapers," Hubert said. "Supposed to be news. New news. Not to be unkind, but no tale I send back about you now can top what's been said. Our readers require folks they ain't heard of. Someone fresh they can imagine. Hate to say it but somebody younger. That Bridger feller for instance. My readers'd like to know how a kid that young got out here, what it's like to be him. Asked a couple of mild questions and he goggled at me like I was something in a circus. Just walked away. Not even manners enough to say word one."

"Galoots hereabouts don't hold manners in high regard. Words either, that matter. Few can read. Most barely write their own names."

"You, however, sir, are said to be a man of letters."

"Schooled a bit growing up," Glass admitted. "Only letters I have truck with these days are letters back home. Parents or sweethearts of some man's hair's been lifted."

"Still, galoot's a word not often heard. Rarely used. Seafaring term, I believe."

Hugh Glass, silent, glimpsed where this Hubert fellow was headed. Clear as a badger trail in the snow. Tell you there's no story to be had just as he's sneaking up on one.

"Some have it you were a sailor in your younger years," the journalist said, leaning close. Glass whiffed a powdery scent over the stink of all the other two-leggeds in the place.

"Cut my teeth as a mariner," Glass said.

Hubert flipped open a morocco-bound notebook, pulled a stick of wood from his pocket. "True you were a pirate with Jean Lafitte?"

"Privateer," Glass said, "not pirate. American navy hired us. Sink enemy ships. Spaniards, then Englishmen."

Hubert scribbled in his notebook.

“What kind of pen is that?” Glass said.

“None, sir. It’s called a pencil. Make them up toward Boston.”

“Where’s the ink?”

“Requires none.”

Hubert handed him the cedar stick.

Glass peered at the pointed black cone in the center and dragged it across the palm of his hand. “It don’t write.”

“Try it on something dry. Paper’s my preference.” Hubert baiting him with a little sarcasm, maybe slyer’n he seemed.

Glass reached for the notebook, drew a line and marveled at it.

“Sign your name,” the dandy said. “I’ll hang onto your autograph.”

Glass handed him back the pencil and the unsigned book.

Hubert said, “But they weren’t all warships were they? Y’all captured cargo ships too.”

“Ordered to keep provisions out of the hands of the enemy,” Glass said.

“That you retained, am I correct? Or sold at a profit?”

Old Glass favored brisk replies over running off at the mouth. “You seem mighty well informed, someone so far away from where it happened. Is it the writer’s trade, invent what he don’t know or understand?”

Hubert’s mouth pooched out with replies of his own, looking undecided which one to spit out.

“Spoils of war,” Glass continued. “Turned it all over to Jean and his one-eyed brother, tote it all up, portion out our share. It was them financed our sorties so we tithed.”

“Including slaves sometimes?”

“Ever’ once in a while.”

“Did that bother you?”

“No end of things was bothering me.”

Talking and scrawling more quickly now but still shooting him a bored look, Hubert flipped a page with his thumb. "How'd you come to be working for pirates in the first place?"

"Same way's we all did. Their broadsides disabled our vessel. We was boarded and looted and scuttled. Go along with 'em or go under. Take the oath or die."

"But later you could quit?"

"Didn't call it that. Called it mutiny. Take your chances on a drum-head court-martial. Pirates not noted for their deliberations but only Lafitte could give the nod to a gibbeting. If not, you're oared ashore. Handshakes all around and a by-your-leave."

Hubert smiled. "So you did what? Details. Readers need details."

"Timed it right. Said nothing. Waited for a big victory. We was anchored just leeward of Campeche and the crew got shore leave."

"Who's we? I was under the impression you escaped alone and only came by a companion somewhere along the way."

"Cap'n Forrest. Generally well-liked so nobody bothered to lock us below. They was in a real hurry to rouse Lafitte from his Maison Rouge featherbed with the news so's they could head on out to piss away their cut. Figured we'd keep until morning."

"And you didn't?"

"Stuck around long enough to make sure the crew was carousing in the grogeries with their drink and their weed. Skeleton crew below with a hogshead. Moon behind the clouds, we give each other a look. Tore off our shoes and dove on in, just our clothes and what was in our pockets. Swam to the mainland and was off to the races."

"I've heard the tale," Hubert said, face stiff with disbelief. "You walked a long ways."

"Up across Spanish Texas into Missouri Territory. I was always a walking fool. Forrest kept up okay."

"But you were a sailor then, not the mountain man you are now."

“Liked hoofing all the same. Just not as much opportunity or such a good reason.”

“Hundreds of miles without shoes? Without weapons?”

“No such thing’s without. Ain’t got ’em you make ’em. Pickings easy enough. Skunk pigs there so fierce you bait ’em with any grub at all or something with a smell might be grub, they come right at you, dare you do your worst. Grip you a stout mesquite branch, a big-assed rock lashed on for a war club. Well-sharpened stick in the other hand, you’ll get you moccasins and food aplenty. Tusks don’t curve like swine. Straight, broad enough to scrape hide, strong’s a steel blade. Make great pigstickers or anything else needs sticking.”

Hubert put his pencil down.

Old Glass couldn’t blame the man. He’d scorn any such tall tale was spun at him. Made it up spur of the moment, never thinking word’d spread. Way too late to change it now. Raise questions. Way they’d abandoned the pirate life. What they did or didn’t take. Where the plunder might be now.

Only three people knew the truth of that.

Couple of years, maybe, Lafitte brothers die off the way they should and their pirates disband, he’d find some other Hubert to juice up the Hugh Glass legend. But only after he and Forrest snuck back for the buried loot.

“Guess that’s when you were captured by Indians,” Hubert said, maybe faking some extra boredom.

“Wolf Pawnee.”

“Burnt your partner at the stake, story goes.”

“Not the way you might suppose,” Glass said. “Indians wouldn’t waste the wood. Damn few big trees where they roamed. Took his clothes and poked hundreds of dry twigs into Forrest. All his parts. Set the sticks on fire. Hard a way to die’s there is, I reckon.”

“You watched him burn?”

“Till they was all looking his way. Got real busy real fast.”

“Some sort of warpaint, newspaper accounts said.”

“Cinnabar powder. Had a tin in my pocket. Wasn’t tied up or nothing ’cause I was next and they’d just as lief I tried to run. Scooped me out a little handful. Pissed on it. Smear’d up my cheeks real good. Pesky turned around, it give him a fright. Let out a shout then they all did. Figured me some kind of spirit had so much magic my face turned to flame soon’s Forrest’s did.”

“Odd thing to have in your pocket, carried all that way. Would’ve thought swimming’d’ve ruined it.”

“Those tins was tight. Always kept ’em to store fixin’s to make a fire.”

“Why then still keep the powder?”

“Every sailor did for shore leave. Often’s not hoors’d trade to rouge themselves up.”

“But you were miles from, um, ladies of that sort. Frontier territory.”

“May not be the man of the world you are,” old Glass said. “But I spent me some time with Pawnees and others. Ain’t never seen a woman won’t daub her face up some.”

“Just surprised you thought that far ahead when you grabbed what you could, jumped off your ship, carried it so long.”

“Don’t see it’s so surprising. Indians like face paint, not just the women. Best trade goods ever. Easier’n carrying whiskey or muskets. Harder to come by’n beads. Deeper red than berry juice and if you’re riding down an enemy don’t come off from rain or sweat. Why you think call ’em redskins?”

Hubert was back to making a few notes. “The story is they took you in? Made you a member of the tribe?”

“Believed my magic’d bring ’em luck. Lived in the chief’s lodges a couple of years. Hunted buffalo together’n the occasional Cheyenne or Sioux. Learned to set snares. Fight’n ride’n attack’n escape. Taught me survive some pretty harsh land. Stood me in good stead as you know.”

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“As don’t we all? Can we go back to the pirates? My readers’d have more interest.”

“Thought you was writing about the fur trade. Why you want to know all that?”

“Sometimes,” Hubert said, “you don’t get the story you want but stumble on a better one. Even in Europe, you say mountain man, you’re the first one comes to mind. Everybody’s heard your time with the Indians and all that came after. Your early sailor and pirate years is just a rumor. Might well be the better tale.”

“Freebooter, not pirate,” Glass said. “One of many. No story to be had there but the one I just give you.”

He stood, gathered his kit and lit out for the door. Get back in that cold, clean air.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### ASSKICK

**P**umped up music blares Natty's fighter, Brendan "Bear" Glass, through the tunnel and down HP Pavilion's strobe-lighted runway. He's hunched low slapping outstretched fan-hands, low-fiving their high-fives.

On the dressing room's bigscreen a shaveheaded play-by-play announcer cageside and his color guy recap the usual clichés about Brendan the Bear: legendary back in the day, dropped from the UFC following several straight losses, snapped up by their cable network hot to get in on the action and the demographic.

Tons of experience, always dangerous, glad to take a fight on short notice. Got his nickname a decade ago from his oversized head, powerful arms and shoulders that merge into a long torso without the interruption of a neck; short, stocky legs that stalk opponents across the

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cage; the low center of gravity that makes him so hard to take down; and his take-no-prisoners style.

The commentator rambles on, filling empty air until the fight starts. He says something about Glass's physiognomy. Color guy dives in like a good sport, says fizzy-what?

In the dressing room Natty finishes grinding up some Vitamin K with the bottom of an empty coumadin bottle. He tears open a packet of powdered energy drink and mixes the two together. He fills a sports bottle with water and pours in the powder with a bartender shake that foams it into a witch's potion.

The cage announcer steps up to the boom mic to introduce the fighters, Natty's cue to tote the bottle down the aisle and take his seat near Brendan's cornermen.

The ref takes it from there. "Fighters, *are* you ready? You ready? *You* ready? Bring it on, c'mon."

The first round goes according to plan. Bear Glass keeps shambling in but shambling fast, relentless as long as he can keep his steam up, throwing vicious powerhouse punches the young Brazilian mostly manages to avoid, backing away, maintaining his distance.

The Bear's loyal fans cheer him on and he's giving them a show, throwing jabs and legkick after legkick, attempting takedowns, swinging for the fences.

His conditioning's pretty good for his age but by the end of the round he's breathing through his mouth and his hands are dropping.

At the buzzer his opponent ambles back to the blue corner as if he's been taking his bitch for a stroll in the park.

Round two. Ringbabes parade outside the cage, hoisting numbered placards angled toward the audience. As if anybody out there's looking at the cards. Ladies spend way more time in the gym than Brendan, who at the bell sidles away from the red corner knowing what he's in for. Only a fool would take this fight on two weeks' notice after the scheduled opponent dropped out from a torn training-camp ACL.

It's the Brazilian's first U.S. fight so Brendan's got no tapes to study. Not that he's ever changed his strategy much for an opponent anyway. What he does know, the dude has youth on his side and a reach advantage. Moved to the States to train with American Top Team after giving the Blackzilians a good look. Local favorite tonight except for Brendan's old fans and the shouting clump of bikers he used to ride with.

Brendan advances to the center of the cage, watchful. How's it going to play out this time? He holds his body in a long C-curve, one hamfist cocked by his right ear and his left extended to grab or jab.

The rangy Brazilian stutter-steps and then comes at him with a Jose Aldo flying knee that Brendan's chin barely avoids. A follow-up roundhouse kick takes his left leg out from under him.

He's busy regaining his balance when a spinning back-elbow connects. Brendan feels blood jetting over his face. The scartissue above his brow must've split.

The Brazilian backs off with a smile, mission accomplished, and starts to play for the crowd. He methodically takes Brendan apart, darting in and out with every combination he's got, obeying numbers and Portuguese codewords shouted in from his corner.

Brendan gets no chance to counterpunch, much less let fly his trademark looping right. Inside kicks smash his leading knee and thigh, deadening his footwork. Jabs and headkicks keep him from closing in.

Not much fun to be had from here on out but a paycheck's a paycheck. Brendan tries a couple of desperation takedowns but it's a running-through-molasses dream.

He's taken down twice himself and the elbows rain down on his face. A D'Arce choke almost finishes him but he escapes at the last minute. Gets his feet under him and wallwalks back up. Of course the guy's not really trying to stop him. The crowd prefers them on their feet slugging away and it's all about what the crowd prefers.

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The Brazilian closes in for the kill with Muay Thai clinches and dirty boxing up against the cage, leaning into him and sapping his strength. Locks his hands behind Brendan's neck and launches knee after knee to the face.

Brendan's head is splitting open. He swipes blood away from his eyes with the back of his glove so the ref won't stop the fight.

The Brazilian goes to the body. Vicious kidney punches and solar plexus stabs leave him gasping and cramped.

Brendan takes a quick look at the clock. All that gets him is an overhand left to the gash, the guy of course targeting it.

Brendan hears something crack. Nothing up there should make that kind of noise. His vision starts troubling him immediately, and it's not just the blood.

Another bullrush pokes him back against the cage. The striking's relentless and he's run out of defense. The Brazilian could take him down at will and finish him with ground-and-pound but instead milks the round for all it's worth. Brendan can barely see past the crimson mist but the cheering and screaming tell him the crowd's on its feet.

Hands back of his neck pull his face down again. Long legs he can't see to defend against come up at him. Another knee to the brow and he hears that cracking sound again.

Got to get out of this clinch. Can't stay standing. Brendan lets his legs fold so he can drop to the ground and take his chances there. But the Brazilian's holding him up with double underhooks and bad intentions.

Brendan covers his head with both forearms but it's still knee city.

He feels the ref separate them. Now he can fall and he does, hard. He pulls himself into a sitting position, hearing his blood splash on canvas, and protests to the ref, "I was defending myself. I can still fight."

"Not saving you from him, Bear. Saving you from you. What you need this for?"

His trainers get him to a stool where the cage doc works to stanch the blood, pressing and wiping away the scarlet haze that blossoms right back. Could use some windshield wipers.

Now here comes Natty into the cage. Which is weird; he never does that. Natty's pushing a sports bottle at him. "Drink it all, quick. Don't spit it out. It's your pick-me-up."

Brendan chugs the bottle before the cage doc swats it away and shoulders Natty aside. Brendan hears a fading shout. "Get me the Avitene. Get me the Thrombin. Something's not right."

FOREBEAR

## CHAPTER TWO

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### WHIPPED

**L**aura Engebretson waits in her Hyalite apartment for her boyfriend to pick her up. He's never on time.

Normally she has nothing against waiting. Always lots to do. This morning, though, she's a bit pissed off. Burned out from research and her dissertation, she wants nothing more than the quiet, uneventful weekend at Branch's brokedick little ranch they'd planned. Then yesterday he called her to insist they go to Hampton's place today so she can finally meet the guy. Watch them some college football and then the big fight on pay-per-view. Branch's uncle Brendan—they never call him Bear—is taking on some newcomer.

"Need to watch it from somewhere," Branch said. "Can't afford satellite and too far out for cable."

Her little apartment in town has no television and never will so she couldn't really say no. Hampton is important to Branch, or at least his money is. Man's got plenty, she's told; made it in the property business. So she's wearing a newer pair of jeans, her best boots and a nice blouse rather than the first western shirt she pulled from the dryer.

She's a ranch gal. Some people don't like that word gal but she does. What else goes with ranch? Ranch girl? No. Ranch lady? Lady rancher? Maybe someday but not yet. She'll answer to cowgirl if she's in a rodeo ring or wearing one. But ranch gal says it all for someone born and raised in the Grasshopper Valley to roam the biggest red Angus spread in Montucky.

Now in her last semester of graduate school, she's indoors more than she'd like. But not much else has changed. She's still footloose and makeup-free, certain that Angus history is on the cusp of a quantum leap and she's just the gal to make it happen.

Her dissertation's almost done and she can't stand to look at it anymore. The Association website is up to date. So she starts the family blog that's been in the back of her mind, *History of the Tumbling E*. With luck she can screenscape the text and print it on parchment in time to surprise her mom and dad on their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

**T**he Tumbling E ranch was born in 1862 though the brand and the name came later. Montucky's first gold strike in Grasshopper Creek brought miners streaming up the Montucky Trail from Utah. The find was so rich and the gold so easy to obtain that soon ten thousand people had cobbled together a rough-hewn town of sorts. One of the first to arrive, a second-generation Norwegian named Einar Engebretson, filled his poke early and wondered what to do next. There was no such thing as a mining claim; you could crowd down to the creek wherever you wanted. But not with all these people.

They were a problem in another way. The town was far from any supply of food or provisions. There was one grocery store but no groceries. Two meat markets but no meat. Pack trains and ox-wagons could only make the trek up from the Great Salt Lake a few times a year because of weather, and they mostly carried nonperishables like flour and salt and whiskey. Nothing was fresh. Game was hard to come by when most miners didn't have a horse or mule. Men were scuffling for food almost as much as for gold.

Engebretson started exploring upstream and soon came to beautiful open pastureland with rich, alluvial soil at the foot of the Pioneer Mountains, only a few miles from town.

Engebretson's family was back in Minnesota. Like most recent immigrants from Norway they were farmers. He was able to get mail back to them by sending it overland to Fort Benton and then down the Missouri. He explained that all those half-starved men were an incredible opportunity and tried to coax the entire family out to join him.

At first they were reluctant. It was too far, too wild, and they'd invested five years in getting established in the Minnesota River Valley. Norwegians were moving into Minnesota in greater numbers so it felt like home. They wrote back about the Homestead Act passed by Congress the same year as the gold strike. In a move designed to open up Western settlement to individual families rather than big southern landholders who relied on slave labor, the law authorized any head of household over 21 who had not taken up arms against his country in the Civil War to settle 160 acres. After five years, if he'd improved the land, it would be deeded to him. The land rush was on and good farmland was going fast.

Engebretson was disappointed to have to go it alone, but a deed to 160 acres sounded good. Land deeds didn't exist in Montucky but soon would and he was maybe the first in this valley to know about it. He asked his relatives to send him all the seeds they could spare. He fig-

ured most things that grew in Minnesota could grow here if they didn't require too much water.

Before the first snow fell he'd erected a small, serviceable log cabin, provisioned a root cellar with such food as he'd been able to procure in town, taken an elk and a doe, and received his seeds. With them came news of an Indian uprising in the Minnesota River Valley. Several Dakota Sioux tribes were infuriated that the annuities promised by treaty were being held by the Indian agents who were supposed to hand them out. They requested payments come directly to the tribes so they wouldn't have to buy supplies on credit from white traders. The Indian agents refused and the traders stopped selling on credit. Hunger and anger rose.

The uprising started when a small Dakota hunting party crossed onto a settler's land and one of the four men saw a chance to steal a few hens' eggs. The settler came upon them with his rifle. Before he could kill them they killed him, and then four other settlers. That night a tribal council agreed to attack up and down the valley, drive away all white settlers and burn down their buildings so they wouldn't come back.

With over 20,000 able-bodied men serving in Minnesota cavalry and infantry regiments fighting on the Union side far away, there was little resistance. The Sioux overwhelmed the whites, killing hundreds of men, women and children in the first few months, sometimes in particularly horrible ways. One survivor described a pregnant woman being cut open, her unborn infant pulled from her and nailed to a barn. Settlers, many of them Norwegian, fled their blazing farmhouses.

The Engebretson clan lost a few lives and everything they'd worked for. The letter said they were on their way south to Iowa to take refuge with relatives for the winter. They'd all join Einar in the spring.

Engebretson told nobody in town about the Homestead Act. He quietly walked the valley, identifying the best farmland. There'd likely be five or six households coming. Including him, that'd be almost a

thousand acres of free homestead. And if he selected adjoining parcels they could share grazing land for livestock.

Early the next spring the families started trickling in, having come by sidewheeler steamboat up the Missouri river from Fort Charles and then overland along the Yellowstone.

Soon he and all six families—along with three of their neighbors—worked alongside each other to build houses and barns for all, to irrigate and till and seed and water and cultivate vegetables and fruits.

Some of the neighbors had daughters. It wasn't long before Einar Engebretson set about fathering a family of his own.

**L**aura Engebretson sets aside her pen. Still no word from Branch, so she refills her coffee cup and skims over the notes she'd jotted down here and there over the past few months.

An hour later he shows up. She doesn't lock her door so he just gives it one knock and comes on in.

Pretty dressed up himself, he pulls her to her feet. It's a long kiss and a good one. "Nice," he says. "I was afraid you'd be mad."

"Mad?" Laura says. "Me? Because you're so late? Why should I care? It's your buddy and your deal, not mine."

"Let's go then. You ready? I don't want to miss the kickoff."

"Give me twenty minutes or so. I want to fix my hair and change clothes."

"Honey—"

"I'm funning you. Of course I'm ready. My hair look like it needs fixing to you?"

"Mind if I tell Hamp it was you made me late?"

"Hell no. Long's you don't mind me telling him how full of shit you are."

"Sweet as ever."

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They drive north of town in Branch's crewcab. As they enter lower Bridger Canyon, the countryside turns lush and the homes even more so.

Laura expects a real estate guy to have a big house but she's still kind of blown away when they turn through a gate and up the sweeping driveway. It's a damn fortress, logs over granite. Even a turret.

The greeting and introduction in the atrium seem sort of perfunctory but at least he's not oozing charm at her. He doesn't exude fat cat as much as she expected and is maybe even halfway handsome in a fortyish sort of way.

Laura scans the walls up to the cathedral ceiling for narrow gun embrasures. Maybe archers with longbows. Or somebody lurking on the roof with a pot of boiling oil.

They get the proud owner tour, one extravagance after another, and a wave of a hand to "the wife." That's about it for aboveground.

Hampton struts them down to his mancave and ushers them past the pigroast fireplace, cast iron firedogs supporting three oversized logs. The heat is so intense she gives it a wide berth. Her dad likes to say, "Indian build small fire, sit close. White man build big fire, sit far away."

Hampton guides them past a turn-of-the-century backbar salvaged from a Tightsqueeze tavern and points them toward theatrical seating facing a huge flatscreen on the wall, centered between the moose mount and the mountain goat. JBL monitors and a subwoofer all too faithfully reproduce every detail of stadium crowdnoise and overwrought announcers. There's even a karaoke machine and two mics.

A few minutes of smalltalk include her before Hampton and Branch do the guy thing, beer-bonding over every subject except whatever it is they're really here for. She easily tunes them out but can't overcome the surround sound and flicker of a couple of faraway teams that hold no interest.

The wife, accompanied by two unidentified daughters, or maybe it's a daughter and a friend, shuttle in silently with tasty hors d'oeuvres. Laura introduces herself a second time so she can get their first names. She asks what's in the delicacies and can she help.

Growing up on the ranch, football afternoons were extended-family affairs. Neighbors and kids trooped in and out of the kitchen into the living room where the Griz or the Bobcats played their hearts out on the tall mahogany Philco. Doors always slamming. Four-wheelers and snowmobiles firing up outside, depending on the weather, and roaring off to chores or adventure. Dedicated fans—men, women, girls, boys and a dog or two—sprawled across worn chairs or couches. Beer and soda pop everywhere.

Women with any sense soon gravitated to the big farm kitchen to share in the work and enjoy the company. Refills of white wine and cooking sherry were easy to come by, soon as she was old enough to ask. Way better conversation where she learned what a Montucky teenager needs to know to carry on the ranching tradition.

No woman in Montucky ever turns down a request to help out. At least Laura's never heard of it happening. But that's what these ladies do. They go, "O no, no, we couldn't," hands all aflutter.

This isn't friends dropping by. This is some kind of business meeting. Plans have been made. Instructions have been given.

At halftime Laura tries again. Heads upstairs for a bathroom but before she reaches the stairs she's admonished that there's one in the cave. Of course there is. It turns out to sport Gilded Age reproduction faucets and something on the wall she can't identify, a flush-mounted stainless steel compartment with a lid. It looks like a cross between a Venus flytrap and a pelican's pouch.

She investigates. Pushes a button and the lid glides up. It's the damnedest urinal she's ever seen. Looks like it could grab a man and pull him right in, start to digest him on the spot.

She keeps her distance from the contraption and does what she came for.

By the two-minute warning the menfolk are still jawing about football and duckhunting, all but ignoring the game. When Hampton hauls out a box of cigars Laura expects he wants to get down to business. She wants to get away.

The wife brings in a plateful of something she calls can apes. They look mighty good. Laura presses for details. Some chef's salmon can ape from a gourmet magazine.

Laura takes one and bites into it thoughtfully. "Wow," she says, her admiration real. "These couldn't be any more perfect. Wild-caught for sure. Wait. Don't go yet."

It's no time for subtlety. She stuffs another canapé in her mouth, grabs a couple of empty platters and leads the way to the door. "You've got to show me how you made these canapés," diplomatically offering up the language lesson. "Food's my strongest weakness."

Endless minutes later, out of the fire into the frying pan, Laura is suffocating in a big designer kitchen hung with immaculate copper utensils where seldom is heard an intelligent word. The ladies stand around making smalltalk with each other and visibly wishing her away.

Finally Branch's shout reaches her. "Honey, come on down. Uncle Brendan's getting greased."

Greased? They're already fighting? She lopes downstairs but it's just a cage doctor smearing vaseline all over Brendan's face. "Skin won't split so easily," Hampton says.

Laura shudders. Before meeting Brendan she'd been ready to despise him. He was in Montucky for a Big Sky ski week not long after she and Branch hooked up, and he invited them to share the condo he was renting.

Brendan represented most of what she felt was wrong with the world. Las Vegas and San Jose, where he spent most of his time training, were the twin gates of hell as far as she was concerned.

His so-called sport glorified the most brutish aspects of the male subspecies, without even the pretense of a ball to carry or a puck to move down the ice. Guys—and now girls—beat each other bloody for almost no money until they reached the heights Brendan has.

But to her surprise she liked him from the get-go. They raced each other laughing down four thousand vertical feet of Lone Mountain's steep north face, startling dilettantes and debutantes decked out in the day-glo colors and miracle fabrics of the season.

Downhill skiing is just one of her sports but maybe her best. She rodeoed through high school and did pretty well, but when the season was over except for skijoring she ruled the nearby Maverick Mountain ski hill. A season pass there cost less than one day here at Big Sky, and fashionwear was punching a headhole through a garbage bag for a spring parka.

At State she tried team sports for a while, volleyball and hoops. Decided she didn't like indoor sports. Smelling your own sweat's healthy. Smelling a herd, well, she preferred cattle. Pounding up and down, back and forth on a hardwood floor made no sense. She felt ridiculous and out of place.

After the last run of the day they'd pick up Branch, lodge-skiing because of his back injuries and reading grow guides to pass the time, delighted they were making friends. Then they'd dine in sporty elegance on Brendan's platinum card. Barhop a little, eavesdropping on beautiful people who came this far to hang out with other beautiful people who came this far. From their booth the three of them would guess at professions based on attire and manner. Microsoft millionaire. Thousand a night callgirl. Coke dealer. Trophy wife.

Brendan was good and effortless company, way different than she'd expected. But Branch had told her that Brendan leaves his sleazy acclaim behind when he comes to Montucky.

She hardly noticed his dents and scars; just those cabbage-ears from too much pounding. He was down to earth, college-educated, courte-

ous, soft-spoken, even funny sometimes. And the big brother role he played when Branch was growing up counted for a lot.

“He’s looking real good,” Branch says in the mancave as Brendan bounds into the cage. “I think he might do okay.”

“Bear’s giving away a lot,” Hampton says as fighter statistics are supered over their faces. “Age, for one. And he doesn’t have that high-level grappling experience, all that BJJ.”

Why do guys always have to act so knowledgeable? She’d bet money neither of them knows his ass from a hole in the ground about martial arts except what the announcers said two minutes ago. But no way is she going to ask what anything that starts with BJ stands for. With brothers you learn to head off wise-ass answers.

Branch helps her out. “Brazilian jiu-jitsu.”

Watching drunks in the crowd cheer at nothing and flash gang signs at the camera, Laura hopes to live long enough to see most men cryogenically frozen and stuffed into giant space exploration vehicles to rocket off and colonize distant planets. Leave the rest of us here to recover this one we’ve been wrecking.

The fight starts and she hates it right off. This snarler’s not the nice guy she knows.

She gets through the first round but only halfway through the second before the color guy shouts, “Look at that D’Arce choke. How beautiful is that?”

“Can’t you turn that thing off?” she says. “How can you watch him get mauled like that?”

The guys ignore her, intent. Or take it as a rhetorical question which it sure as hell is not. “At least turn down that damn screaming.”

Laura reaches for the remote but Hampton blocks her with his caiman belly boots.

This was a bar, she’d snatch it before he knew what was going on. But not in his own house. Man’s got his agenda and she’s holding back until she knows what it is.

She's sure Hampton didn't invite her. Tough shit, Hampton. Get used to it. Branch includes her in just about everything that matters. Not courtesy or some togetherness thing. Except for a diminishing habit of stubbornness, he relies on her advice, the way she sees things, as he should. She slides closer on the pigskin couch and squeezes his leg before getting up and turning her back on the bigscreen. She examines the bookcase, leatherbound first editions arranged by the color of their bindings.

Fight's over soon enough; at least there's that. Slantwise she glimpses scary damage before Branch takes the remote. Hears him say, "Which button I push?" Her cue to return to the couch for the next act.

Hampton breaks out brandy, a signal for the meeting to start. Fine with her. She declines a snifter, not ready to give up her bystander status just yet.

There's some introductory bullshit she ignores before Hampton tells Branch, "Since you're here, let's review the long-term plan. But now we've got this short-term problem to get out of the way first."

Branch says, "Which is?"

"Your partner there." A dismissive wave at the dark television screen. "No way he's transporting the load."

"Don't underestimate him," Branch says. "He's resilient. He'll heal up fast."

"Doesn't matter. Not looking the way he does. Cop spots those wounds, right away he thinks thug, figures some crime's involved. You know he'll search the car. Mule requirement number one is look clean-cut, aboveboard."

"Rather you not call Brendan a mule," Branch says. "He's just helping me out."

"How you look at it. But see it the way a cop does. Bust Bear for a felony amount, threaten him with years, find out where he got the stuff, which I don't much care about, and where it's going which I do. We got no choice, Branch. You're gonna have to go down and drive it up."

“Honey, no,” Laura says. “Why you? Get somebody else. Or let Mr. Bigshot here do it, he wants it so bad.”

“I’m distribution,” Hampton says. “Branch is supply and I’m running out.”

“I’m dry too,” Branch says.

“So now you’re a mule? When’d you sign up for that?”

“Darlin’, we’re talking about a special situation here.”

“Got that right. Federal interstate felony’s the technical term.”

Hampton ignores her. “Your truck ready?”

“Always,” Branch says.

“When can you leave?”

Laura pushes the anger out of her voice. “Honey, you see the way this escalates, how much trouble you could get in? Just grow for your patients.”

“Can’t produce enough. Not yet,” Branch says.

“So back off. Drop some patients till you can.”

“Look,” Hampton says. She hears condescension drip. “You’re just seeing one part, um, Laura. My dispensaries are falling all over themselves trying to be growers. It’s way harder’n they think. The shelves are empty and they’re chasing down street dealers, maybe a narc or two in there. Can’t run a business that way. Branch has grow experience they don’t. He’ll solve the problem soon as I lock in a facility. Till then we do what we have to do. And that’s him go south this time and bring back the weed.”

“What’s going on, Branch? That we haven’t talked about.”

“Mostly just growing a bit more than we planned ’cause we’ve found a better place. I was waiting to tell you till we made sure it’s a go. Hamp’s secured the location and he’ll pay for everything. He’s made me an offer to set it up and run it till his dispensaries get their act together. A real good offer. The pay’s fine and I get to keep back enough medicine for my own patients. It’s a real opportunity.”

“Quantity?” Laura cuts to the chase. “More than ninety-nine plants? The federal limit?”

“Way more,” Hampton says, pride in his voice. “They won’t bother us. We’re state-compliant, long as we’ve got the cards. Supply’s got to match demand. Grow big or go home. Look at the bright side. After this run you won’t have to worry about Branch or his uncle crossing state lines with California weed.”

“It’s only for a while,” Branch says. “Once I save up enough to fund my own operation Hamp gets someone else to run his grow. There’ll be plenty of takers.”

“Seems like there’s already one taker too many,” Laura says. “We voted in the law we wanted, Branch. Stay inside it.”

“Matter of funds,” Branch says. “And timing.”

“I’d say five or ten years in prison sure is a matter of timing. We’ve gone ’round and ’round about this.”

“Have to look ahead,” Hampton says. “What the legalities are going to be, not what they are now. Situation’s way in flux. I’m looking for a lawyer to keep us all safe while we work on the legislature.”

“Looking for? You send Branch across state lines while you look through the yellow pages? That’s how you divide up responsibilities?”

“Brendan’s never had no problems with the drive,” Branch says.

“You’re Brendan? You being in jail’s the same as Brendan being in jail? Same to me? Same to us?”

Hampton says, “Calm down. We don’t have to decide tonight. Let’s give it a few days, see how quickly Bear recovers. Maybe you’re right about his recuperative powers. If not, maybe we can put our patients off a few weeks, round up something local meantime.”

Nobody who knows her ever tells her to calm down. “How about Branch just builds your setup. He consults. Find you somebody else once the plants are in the ground. Let them break the law, take the risk.”

“Something to ponder,” Hampton says. “But I thought he welcomed the chance. He who hesitates...”

Branch says, “It’s big, Laura. Opportunity like this doesn’t come along every day. This green rush won’t last. We’ll go world-class, put Montucky on the map.”

“Montucky’s already on the map. You ask Brendan’s advice about this?”

“You know he’ll insist on bringing it himself. Take the risk rather than me.”

“Of course he will. And so he should, just like always. He’s good at it and he likes to help out. Who’re the two of you to be second-guessing him? Besides, he keeps talking about moving up here once he’s done fighting. Isn’t that what we just saw? Who’ll notice a few extra bags if he’s moving all his stuff, no matter how he looks?”

“Bear wants to come here?” Hampton says. “To live?” His eyes widen. “Girl, you just give me one hell of an idea. Tell you the truth, I’d rather’ve talked to Branch about this in private, let you guys hash it out after. But now? I’m glad you showed.”

Branch says. “Darlin’, you know I won’t make this big a decision without you. We’ll discuss it.”

“Bet your ass we will.”

“Whipped,” Hampton mutters, too softly for most folks to notice. But growing up on a ranch your hearing gets real good. It’s a survival skill. Calves bleating a mile away, wolves howling too close. Dogs by the hearth whimpering.

“Not whipped,” Laura says right back. “Stroked. Smoothed out and coddled some. Pleasured.” She doesn’t put much into it, just enough to give Hampton a glimpse of what an unfettered Montucky woman might be like, even if she’s not yet so good with the can apes.

Branch knows better than to say anything. He lets the conversation lapse into silence. Something she values in a man. Most don’t know when to keep their damn mouths shut.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### NOTHING XCEEDS LIKE XCESS

**B**rendan “Bear” Glass releases himself from the hospital against doctors’ orders. Holes up for days before he’s ready to confront his manager.

Natty Gason answers the knock at his ramshackle downtown San Jose apartment.

Brendan Glass clenches one big fist in Natty’s Jesusfreak hair. The other bunches and twists the front of that stupid Mao jacket and lifts the skinny fart a foot off the floor. Slams him into the wall. “Cock-sucker,” Brendan says. “What the fuck did you give me?”

“Can’t breathe,” Natty says. “Put me down, I’ll tell you.”

“You tell me, we’ll see if I put you down. Or out the window.”

“Coumadin,” Natty coughs. “Medication for heart patients.”

“Hospital called it warfarin.”

“Active ingredient.”

“Looked it up. It’s fucking rat poison. You gave me rat poison.”

“Just some medicine in your energy drinks. Widely prescribed for hypertension. Thins the blood out some is all. Makes it easier to bleed.”

“I’ll say. But why? Why so much? I was spewing waterfalls. Couldn’t see to defend myself. Got me all busted up, man.”

Natty, still dangling, says, “How’s I to know? Not like there’s dosage information. Fans love a bloody fight and you sure gave ’em one. Nobody’s thought of this before. We’re blood brothers here on out. Dose it better next time. Put me down, you lug.” He kicks Brendan in the nads.

Brendan gives him a ragdoll toss halfway across the living room.

Never know what to expect from the guy. Natty does a Chaplinesque goof on the whole thing. Dusts himself off like an old drunk thrown through swinging doors onto a dusty street. “Sit down’n I’ll explain. We need to talk anyways before the conference call, get our story straight.”

And like that it’s over.

Natty leads Brendan past the usual cartons on the floor. Almost no furniture in the room, Natty not a guy to stay put for long. Same old coffee table and couch. But a few things catch Brendan’s eye. Convenience store shelf displays line the coffee table, filled with thin packets of powder bearing a Crave logo. A 55-gallon drum with the lid off and a citrus smell in the air. A papercutter and a row of identical sealameal machines in the corner attached to a power strip.

Natty points to the couch. “Sit.” As if he’s in charge...

Brendan sits. Natty scrunches against the far end, sizing him up, wary.

“I’m the laughing stock of MMA,” Brendan says. “You see the stories? New names I got? Crimson Mask? Red Badge of Courage? Ever find out what you give me, be calling me d-Con Jones.”

“Won’t. I hushed it up. Preached HIPAA to the doctors. Can’t say a thing.”

“Goddamn joke, me in a hospital. Massive transfusions, can’t stop the bleeding? There goes my image. I’m a victim, first time in my life.”

“Good thing you went, got those x-rays. Orbital fracture, you’d’ve shrugged it off, put ice on it. Blame the rest on me but I get a few points for that.”

“Like hell. Account of you I couldn’t see nothing but scarlet. Dude was hammering a blind man. You ruined my career, dumbfuck.”

“Ruined? Gave it new life. Fight of the night, all that blood. Know how many calls I got since? Every manager with an up-and-comer making his cage debut wants you as his opponent. Know how many times that second round’s been replayed? It’s all over the Internet.”

“Great. Just what I need, a new lowlight. Watch my ass get kicked a thousand times. Ain’t words enough to describe the thrill.”

“Means a bigger cut of a bigger purse next fight,” Natty says. “Problem is you’re all hung up on your old image and it’s been fading for years. Just one of many MMA fighters, hate to say it, past his prime. They all start to blur together. Time to decide what’s your next role.”

“Time for who to decide, me or you?”

“You, of course. But it’s a manager’s job, present you some alternative scenarios that get you back in the public eye. And I figure only an archetype everyone can relate to’s gonna work. Know what jumped out at me? A battle-scarred veteran cop who never says die. An old gun-fighter facin’ down a trigger-happy new kid. Rocky whatever. But it’s gotta be a twentyfirst-century version no one’s seen before. And has to be in a not-too-long media bite that goes viral.”

“Presented it, huh? That’s what you call it? Could’ve just said.”

“Didn’t know what would happen, Bear. Might’ve been nothing at all. Didn’t see the need to upset you before the fight. Turned out epic, man. Maybe even iconic. Lot of ways we can go from here. Match you

up with some young challenger you can kick the shit out of, be comeback story of the year.”

“Ain’t happening.”

“Well then, we go the other way. Now you’re so recognizable and got the MMA pedigree, let’s take the archetype outside the cage. I’ll start pitching you for film roles. For TV commercials. Can’t you just see a Harley ad campaign? Could be the best thing ever happened to you. Keep you in the public eye for years. Look at the Rock.”

“I’m never going back in the cage, Natty. *No mas* nohow. What I came to tell you. Start coaching again if I have to. See will some big-name training camp take me on. Work my way up, maybe get my own gym someday.”

“That’s what you wanna do the rest of your life?”

“Don’t see many options. Better’n skull fragments in my brain next fight or two. But I gotta say it, Natty. Not sure I still see a we in any of this. Not after what you done.”

“Bullshit. Course there is. We made a lot of money together. Think I’m gonna abandon you now just ’cause your first career is in its twilight? You need a manager more’n ever, trust me.”

“Trust the guy who poisoned me?”

“Maybe wasn’t my best idea ever. But look. You can milk your fame ’least a year longer in MMA, build up a little nest egg. Or let me get you a Hollywood agent.”

“Wasting your breath, Natty. But think you can get me in the movies, have at it.”

“Not my only contingency plan, by the way. Just none as good as the blood thing. F’rinstance in the meantime we better kick our network marketing up a notch.”

“How we gonna do that? Crave’s not goin’ anywhere.”

“Not the way it is.”

“Any truth to Vitasparc’s gonna reformulate it?”

“Naw. I invented that shit for a conference call one week all the news was bad.”

“Might as well hang it up then. The rest of the Vitasparc line sucks worse.”

“You’re right. We can’t rely on them. Have to have a better product.”

“So jump to some other MLM outfit? We can’t jerk our guys around again. They’ll bail.”

“I’m as sick of that dance as they are. Dump one miracle money-maker for another. Start everybody all over with new promises sound just like the old ones. No way.”

“So where’s that leave us?”

“Create a new product of our own.”

“Come on, Natty, get real. You know how much money it takes to bring one to market. How long it takes a new organization to build credibility.”

“So we don’t do that. We present a breathtaking improvement of an existing product we act as if comes from Vitasparc.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Forget thinking outside the box. We think inside the drum.” Natty walks him over to the big blue barrel. “Look like laundry detergent to you?”

“You say so.”

“Customs gave me benefit of the doubt coming through Oakland but it scared me half to death.” Natty reaches past the convenience store displays to open an unmarked carton filled with empty packets the size of Chinese takeout soysauce. “Printed these up to look just like Crave packets except for the name. This here’s our new brand, you’n me.”

Brendan reads the label.

*xCeed*  
*because nothing xCceeds*  
*like xCess*

“Plunk in our magic powder and we’re good to go. Wanna guess how many packets that drum’ll fill. How many thousands of dollars?”

Brendan says, “What happens when Vitasparc gets wind of us faking it’s their product? You know they will.”

“Maybe, but when? They’re not watching us. Meanwhile we start piling up xCeed sales and street cred.”

“Sooner or later, though...” Brendan says.

“They wouldn’t do much at first. Maybe a cease and desist order. Put a hold on our commission checks? Threaten to kick us outta the family? Big whoop. We tell ’em right off we’ve already discontinued all sales. Then we kick Vitasparc to the curb. Put together our own marketing plan and a way better comp plan, bring all our guys over.”

“Still might come after us. You hear about those guys 5-Hour Energy sued for counterfeiting? How much they had to settle for?”

“Yeah, but where’d be the evidence? Nobody hangs onto a used packet any more’n they would a used condom. Right off we burn all our existing packets and displays. Repackage the stuff in private-label ones we’ve been saving for an emergency. Design and words look nothing like Vitasparc or Crave so no infringement. We walk away clean, set up some LLC and get back to gettin.”

“Suppose it ain’t selling, just like it ain’t selling now.”

“Tell the organization adios. Buy back anything they’re holding, fold up our tents and slip away.”

Brendan says, “You know you’re beating a dead horse, don’t you? Don’t shit a shitter. Way too many well-established energy drinks out there.”

Natty digs his hands into the 55-gallon drum. Sifts powder through his fingers. “None like what you’re looking at. Straight out of a secret

spinoff lab back in Bangkok. Least that's the whisper story we tell our heavy hitters."

"Different how?"

"Secret ingredient? Fuck if I know. Yak sack, tiger jizz, ground up water buffalo package, rhino horn? Depends who you talk to. But tuk-tuk drivers been logging thirty-six hour shifts on it for years. There's no crime unless we false-advertise or it contains drugs. DEA won't pursue it and FDA won't have the time."

"So this stuff's legal?"

"Is over there. Believe me, you sell powder to millions of folks year after year in a death-penalty Golden Triangle place like Thailand, you know nothing criminal's in there. Our competitive advantage is so far it's strictly not for export."

"Except to you."

"Cept to us, Bear. Told you, it's still me'n you. We spoon a few pennies' worth into xCeed packets, seal 'em up, stick 'em in Crave displays, get us a million percent markup or thereabouts, who's to know? And mark it up so our guys make out like bandits too."

Brendan shrugs at the barrel and says, "I guess you got enough for a market test. But what happens once it's gone?"

"We get us some more. Label a few drums over there on the manifest as fabric softener, a few as dish soap, whatever. But we gotta find one of them little international ports of entry boondoggled by some inland senator to export soybeans or some such. One up in Montucky I want to look at close since looks as if we might be doing that other thing up there anyway."

"Still don't see it. Have to be crazy good."

"Let's us find out."

Natty gives him a long-handled spoon and shows him how much powder to put in a packet.

They position three filled packets side by side on sealameal machines. Natty presses down handles on two and Brendan the third, sucking out air and vacuum-sealing the xCeed pouches.

Natty uses a papercutter to trim the sealed tops evenly. He substitutes the xCeed packets in the front row of a Crave display and admires how perfectly they fit in the slots. “Never know, would you? Looks real as can be. Fetch a couple of bottles of water from the fridge, would you?”

They drink enough to make some room in the bottles.

Natty snips open two packets and hands one to Brendan.

With thumb and forefinger they pooch the pouches open, pour the powder into the water bottles and screw the caps back on. They shake them up and hold them to the light, connoisseurs admiring the scary green color.

They uncap the bottles and inhale the bouquet.

“Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug,” Natty says.

Brendan says, “Makes you say hidey-ho.”

They drain the bottles.

Brendan rocks a bit. Says, “Burns your tummy, doncha know. Wow. Something’s goin’ on all right. What’s the third batch for?”

From under his Jesus hair Natty gives him a big smile and a wink. He takes a cigarette paper out of the zigzag pack on the coffee table and crumbles in one of Johnny Legal’s buds from the everpresent jar. He sprinkles the powder evenly on top and rolls a joint.

“The fuck you doing?”

“You’re not in training now, man. Take a walk on the wild side.”

Hands held up in mock horror, Brendan says. “I don’t drink my pot. Don’t smoke my energy drinks.”

“Wuss.” Natty shrugs. “More for me.”