

Chapter 1

I rolled over in bed and closed my eyes, my thoughts drifting into the erotic. The salacious imagery faded out like a damaged roll of film. I was in no mood to be reminded of my hapless life. The move from Los Angeles to a tiny mountain hamlet a hundred miles away offered an affordable rent and a simpler perspective, but did nothing to beef up my fortunes.

The view from the window lifted my spirits. I gazed out on mountain peaks covered in snow and landscapes more suited for a painter's canvas. Spring had arrived, and the tall sugar pines scented the air with sweet smelling sap. At six-thousand feet, winter still held its bite. The temperate California weather I'd come to expect lingered only in memory as I shivered underneath the covers.

The nearest shopping center was a twenty-minute drive into town. Packs of coyotes lingered in the woods at night howling like crazed derelicts as I

tried to sleep. The ten by twelve-foot cabin lacked proper insulation, with one heater vent the size of a postcard to warm up the place. Varmints set up house under the sink and behind the shower stall, seeking shelter from the biting cold. Spiders of every variety and size settled in, keeping me vigilant at night as I lay in bed.

During the day, I sat around layered in wool clothes, a suede coat, and a thick cotton beanie drawn over my ears. I'd put my California dream on ice in more ways than one.

A knock on the door stole my attention.

“Who is it?”

“It's me, Tim.”

His voice carried through the thin wood siding.

“Just a minute.”

The cabin stayed cold in the morning. I kept the heater off at night to save on utility bills. I feared an empty wallet would put me out of business altogether.

I climbed off the bed dressed in long-johns and slipped on some wool socks and a pair of jeans. I threw on a flannel shirt, draped a cap over my head, and opened the door.

“Sorry to bother you, Bob, but I need you to move your car. I’m cutting the grass today.” He kept a polite smile through his scruffy black beard.

I clenched my teeth against the cold breeze, squinting into the sunlight pouring in. He’d parked a lawn tractor out front.

“Give me a minute,” I said.

“Sure. Take your time.”

He looked to be in a hurry. Fresh turf appeared after the rain we had the day before. Green shoots of grass covered the grounds, giving life to the landscape. He had no cause to ruin the scenery, but the self-appointed groundskeeper didn’t miss an opportunity to earn some extra money.

I slipped on a pair of sneakers. “I see you’re still working for the guy who owns the property.”

“Hell, yeah. My pension doesn’t kick in for another six months.”

“What are your plans when it comes through?”

“I’m thinking of buying a Winnebago.”

“Moving out?”

“Hell, no. My cabin’s the best deal on the mountain.” He eyed my room with a brazen smile. “I couldn’t live in this dump.”

“It makes do,” I said.

“I figure I’ll drive around the country and check out a few places I haven’t seen.”

“You’ve got it made, Tim.”

“I’m going to enjoy it while I can. I don’t want to drop dead in some little shack like this.” He looked around and laughed.

It was a pointless remark, but I took him seriously.

He stepped away and climbed onto the small tractor. That soon-to-be government pension didn’t slow him down. Taking on piddling chores at twelve

bucks an hour helped pay his rent along with his methamphetamine habit. I hadn't earned a dime in six months. Watching him toil for minimum wage had me jealous.

“I've gotta get off this goddamned mountain,” I raged under my breath.

When I'd mentioned some months ago that I'd relocated from Los Angeles, he treated me as if I had a trove of hidden wealth stashed away. I played along, pretending to be convalescing in the mountain air before returning to my lucrative business ventures.

But my time here stretched out long, and he'd begun to take me for a loser. That was the deepest cut of all.

I went out and parked my car behind the cabin where the grass grew wild. The tractor started up again and moved along at a snail's pace. I went back inside, showered, shaved, and began the day more appropriately. A pot of coffee brewed on the stove as I prepared a bowl of cornflakes and two slices of toast. I can't go broke on that.

At noon, I walked to the local post office a half mile down the road. The building resembled a ski hut, with no more than a handful of people to fit inside. A pile of junk mail crowded my mailbox. I threw it in the trash and kept the credit card bills. Staying on top of those monthly payments saved me from ruin. Those bankers had some heart, after all.

I found a manila envelope scripted to my name in the pile. It had no return address. Fearing the danger it might contain, I headed back to the cabin not wanting to make the headlines. Blowing up a government office or spreading Anthrax around the county would put me in jail for a long haul.

I had reason to fear for my safety. My name had gained notoriety among the internet conspiracy crowd. Online blogs accused me of being in league with the late and infamous Colonel Rippendorf, a former renegade militia leader.

His former surrogates saw me as a traitor who'd sabotaged the Colonel's plan to overthrow the

government. None of it was true. But I couldn't reveal the nature of my association with the late Colonel or the role our intelligence agencies played alongside.

The groan of the tractor had stopped. I could hear the birds and the crickets, along with the whoosh of cars sailing past on the two-lane highway bordering the property.

Day-trippers drove up from the desert to cool off in summer and frolic in snow during winter. Bikers drove past with their temperaments on display, revving up their Harleys with ear-splitting disregard. Country living wasn't all it's cracked up to be.

Having made the wrong career choices in the past, I had little time to recoup my losses. I was determined to live the rest of my days in a luxurious gated community, with all the amenities and comforts accompanying me to my grave. Thousands of retirees lived their lives along those lines, nestled in a balmy desert oasis at the base of the mountain some forty miles away.

I sat down on a chair and tore open the envelope.