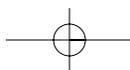


## CHAPTER 1

They mockingly called her “Goat Head,” or “Pretty Babe,” or, dismissively, “the Guatemalan.” She was in truth from Nicaragua, and it would have been the height of flattery to describe her even in the most generous terms as pretty. She was noticeably disfigured, her appearance the result of the childhood onset of a developmental bone disease known as cherubism, a disorder that had robbed her of potential beauty, turned her squat and pumpkin-faced, and so altered and recontoured the bones in her face and jaws that her eyes were perpetually cast skyward as if forever searching for heaven.

Most of the obstacles she had encountered during her thirty-nine years—her cherubism, the childhood taunts, the loss of her parents, her struggle to raise a fatherless child, and growing up in the midst of revolution and civil unrest—had only made her stronger, more determined, more focused on rising above her assigned lot of a Central American peasant born to faceless migrant fruit-pickers, an anomalous, disfigured burden in the eyes of the world. Schooled by circuit riding American nuns, she’d largely beaten the odds, learning to speak impeccable English by the age of seven and becoming accomplished at math and music by the age of ten. Ever charming and deferential in spite of her handicaps, she was on the road to avoiding a life of poverty and toil by her eighteenth birthday. But at nineteen, after a year of



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college, she fell in love with a guerrilla freedom fighter, had a child, and found herself consumed by obstacles once again.

When her husband of thirteen years was killed, a casualty of persistent revolution, she reluctantly left her child with relatives and traveled by train to the United States by way of Mexico, hidden inside the hopper of a rotary gondola car used for transporting coal. Still grieving and despondent, she rode for two days on a back corner of the coal car's small iron sill between the gondola and the wheels of the train, knees folded, her feet against her buttocks, the lower half of her body dangling outside two feet above the rails as her muscles screamed in agony. Hanging on with her arms, she endured the train's thundering starts and stops and dehumanizing jars as it made its way from Mexicali to Los Angeles, toward what she expected—no, demanded—to be a better life.

What she found in the City of Angels was a culture she was ill prepared for. The city's streets teemed with tens of thousands of lost immigrant souls just like her. It was a land of desperate indentured hostages there to serve those who would use and abuse them. However, she found work and a place to live that was light years better than where she'd come from. Within two days of her arrival, Theresa Mesa Salas Del Mora was employed in the house-keeping service of a Century City hotel with a penchant for hiring and just as quickly firing a ready stream of illegal immigrants.

The job paid minimum wage, and the hours were graveyard and grueling, but Theresa stuck with her plan, enduring eight long months of physically demanding, often demeaning work, with only two days off. Always looking to better herself, she left that job for a better one, then discarded that job for another at a boutique hotel in the Wilshire district, followed by jobs at

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European-style hotels in Beverly Hills and Bel Air. Eventually, laden with references that trumpeted her reputation as a tireless worker, her honesty, and most of all her loyalty and humility, she left Los Angeles and ventured east to the Rockies to serve as manager of housekeeping at a posh Park City, Utah, ski resort. From there she moved on to Colorado to take charge of a similar crew at a trendy Aspen getaway.

It had taken her six years to make her way to Aspen. She'd endured those difficult, long, and lonely years without the essence of her life, her now nineteen-year-old son. Finally, with a nest egg to fall back on, the woman whose coworkers in the City of Angels had once mockingly called her "Goat Head," "the Guatemalan," or "Pretty Babe," uttering the names as if calling to a pet, took her biggest chance yet. She moved to Denver after being recruited in blatant big-business fashion by Howard Stafford, a man whose wealth was said to be difficult to measure even by those in the know, to oversee a service staff of eight who ran Stafford's lush fifteen-acre compound. The compound comprised a twenty-thousand-square-foot main house and outbuildings that included her own residence; her salary would have made any MBA envious. Before accepting the position, she'd been told by envious acquaintances who knew the old-moneyed Denver landscape that she would be working for an eccentric—a man who always sounded as if he had a high frontal cold; whose closets, TV cabinets, and kitchen pantry sported combination locks—an antisocial recluse who wore a newscaster's ever-present painted-on smile and owned scores of identical silk shirts, alligator shoes, lizard-skin cowboy boots, and black gabardine trousers. Ignoring the possible downside and the advice of friends, she grabbed for her American dream. A month after signing on with Stafford,

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feeling secure and stable at last, she decided that it was time for her son, Luis, now two months shy of his twentieth birthday, to join her in America.

Luis Alejandro Del Mora arrived in Denver on a Mexicana Airlines flight, with all his papers in order and a newly minted student visa, on a crystal-clear, picture-perfect early-November afternoon, eight weeks to the day after his mother began working for Howard Stafford. Dressed in sandals and a peasant's poncho, sporting a revolutionary-style Nicaraguan mountain highlands guerrilla's straw hat, and carrying a backpack filled with two thirty-two-ounce bladders of wine, Luis walked arm in arm with his mother down a Denver International Airport concourse bustling with Americans. During Theresa's six-year absence, Luis had been taught to despise all such people by the cousins of cousins and the friends of friends with whom he had lived. Luis had arrived on American soil not as a child seeking maternal reunion and comfort, as his mother envisioned, but as a young man soured by years of separation, embittered by a lost child's disappointment, and angry at having had to live in the underbelly of a Nicaraguan caste system underpinned by American capitalism. He was suspicious, agitated, insular, and independent.

"You're in America now," Theresa said, beaming as she stopped to wrap her arms around her only child. "You're safe."

Luis forced a half smile and squeezed his mother tightly as he watched the people around him scurry disjointedly in every direction, aware that the place that had given his mother such hope and purpose could never do the same for him.

Within weeks of his arrival, Luis Del Mora was doing what he had learned to do best—what in six years of living with the cousins of cousins in Nicaragua he had been taught to do—steal.

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In Nicaragua he had stolen cars and stereos, fruit and furniture, and carted away truckloads of computers and TVs. In America he would do the same. However, he wouldn't steal the trivial tokens that Americans, fat with opulence, toyed with briefly and then discarded. His sights were set much higher, and thanks to his mother's perseverance and position, he planned to extend his thievery to include the rare and priceless.

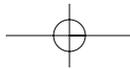
And so it began. On days when he was supposed to be attending Denver's Metro State College, he instead honed his skills as a thief—selling, fencing, and bartering stolen goods. Things went well enough that two months after his arrival, with his mother able to see only warmth, charm, and goodness in her son, Luis informed Theresa that he had secured a part-time job as a translator's aide at a Denver language school. With his nonexistent college courses and fabricated job that kept him far from the watchful eye of his mother, Luis began to lay the groundwork to steal from Howard Stafford—from a house filled with books and art objects that stretched back to the fourteenth century. Ultimately, Luis knew he would be able to cherry-pick gems that included rare books, ephemera, pottery, textiles, and art; he hoped that a reclusive pack-rat hoarder such as Stafford, steeped in his own eccentricities, might never even miss these things.

Luis started with a series of trial runs, stealing unimportant history books, railroad timetables, and what he took to be insignificant things that Stafford was unlikely to miss in a thirty-thousand-volume library before setting his sights on the real prizes in the Stafford kingdom. Starting small, he told himself, would give him the inspiration he needed to complete the gambit. With his run of the grounds and Theresa's run of the house, it was easy to learn from the cooperative staff, and from a mother

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wearing blinders, what things in the hacienda were the most precious. His most significant moment came one day as he walked through the main house with his mother. They passed the door of the library, and Theresa told him that the room, with its massive oak doors and fourteen-foot-high cross-beamed ceilings, was forbidden territory.

“The library is off limits,” she said as they walked by. “Even to me.” She grabbed Luis by the hand and pulled him with her toward the kitchen. That experience moved Luis to read up on Stafford—study the man who was his mother’s employer—infiltrate his thinking in order to find out what treasures he might have locked behind the massive oak library doors. It took some digging to ferret out the reclusive rich man’s passions, but Luis spent days combing through books, newspapers, and the Internet. In the end, he learned that what mattered most to the fifty-eight-year-old reclusive native Coloradan was to amass the world’s ultimate private collection of rare Western maps, vintage Western photographs, and books. With that knowledge in hand, five months after landing in America Luis Del Mora decided that the time for trial runs had passed, and the time for the serious business of stealing had arrived.

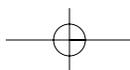


## CHAPTER 2

The neon sign above the door to CJ Floyd's recently opened twelve-hundred-square-foot South Broadway Antique Row store screamed in glowing red letters: *Ike's Spot: Vintage Western Collectibles*. CJ had chosen the name to honor his deceased uncle, Ike Floyd, the man who had raised him, taught him right from wrong, loved and nurtured him while fighting his own lifelong battle with alcoholism. Ike had snatched CJ by the arm and thumped his "narrow ass" whenever his nephew had strayed from the straight and narrow.

Mavis Sundee, the lifelong drop of feminine sweetness in CJ's hard-edged life, and fiancée of eight months, had suggested the name. When he'd asked her why, Mavis had emphasized the point with a palm slap: "For the same reason Mae's Louisiana Kitchen isn't called Mavis's Place after me, or Willis Sundee's after my father." Aware that Mae's, the landmark seventy-year-old Denver soul food restaurant and one of the three businesses that Mavis ran for her aging father, had been named for Mavis's mother, a civil rights pioneer who had been born and bred in New Orleans, CJ had smiled and agreed.

Eight months earlier, after a brush with death in a remote New Mexico wilderness, CJ had stepped away from life as a bail bondsman and bounty hunter, the only job he'd known since coming home from two naval tours of Vietnam. After the New Mexico



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ordeal, he was determined to open a vintage Western collectibles store on Denver's famed Antique Row. He had worked the streets and sewer-rat haunts of Denver for more than thirty years, but that case had nearly claimed Mavis's life, so after dispatching it and leaving his bail-bonding business in the capable hands of his Las Vegas-showgirl-sized partner, Flora Jean Benson, CJ was happy now to call himself a former bail bondsman.

Flora Jean, a U.S. Marines intelligence sergeant during the Persian Gulf War, now operated Floyd & Benson's Bail Bonds out of the first floor of the stately old Victorian building on Bail Bondsman's Row that Ike had left CJ. CJ, who still lived upstairs in a converted four-room apartment, had sold Flora Jean the business and a partial interest in the building during a Christmas Eve title-document ritual. A month later, with a three-year lease and every dime he'd managed to scrape together, he'd invested in Ike's. CJ was now an antiques dealer.

Business had been slow for the entire month of March, and CJ was having second thoughts about his career move, but Lenny McCabe, an aging hippie antiques dealer, and CJ's landlord, who operated the shop on the other side of the duplex CJ leased and was one of the few dealers who'd welcomed CJ onto the street with open arms, chalked up the lull in business to springtime in the Rockies. In pep talks to CJ, he'd claimed that people don't like to part with their money during the time of slush and mud.

CJ wasn't certain he could believe a man who braved Denver's fluctuating springtime elements in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, wore his hair in a ponytail down to his belt loops, and trudged around in flip-flops in the snow. But he had to trust someone's experience, and since Lenny, a ten-year resident of the Row,

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had gleefully leased him space and helped him move into it, CJ was willing to have some faith in him.

CJ had started amassing his collection of antiques, folk art, and Western memorabilia during his lonely preteen years, when his uncle's drinking and erratic hours had forced CJ to find something stable to immerse himself in. Although sports had served as a partial fix, the world of antiques and collectibles had been his permanent elixir.

His apartment was cluttered with coffee cans full of cat's-eye marbles, and jumbos and steelies too. In the basement of the building he had stacks of mint-condition records—78s, 45s, and vintage LPs stored in tomato crates gathering dust. In his four-decade quest to collect, he had amassed hundreds of tobacco tins and inkwells from all over the world, along with maps in every size, color, and shape, maps whose pages folded and zipped and accordioned into place as they documented every place CJ had ever been and many more.

CJ's collection of antique license plates said more about him than any other items in his collection. He had started that collection during his teenage years, when Ike's drinking had reached its peak and street rods and low riders had taken the place of family in his life. The prides of his license-plate collection were his 1916 Alaska plate and a 1915 Denver municipal tag. Both had been fabricated using the long-abandoned process of overlaying porcelain onto iron. Although the collection was impressive, it remained incomplete, and Mavis, one of the few people who had ever seen the entire collection, suspected that, like CJ, it very likely would never be whole.

It was approaching twilight as CJ and Lenny McCabe stood near the back of Ike's Spot behind a glass display case that housed

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the bulk of CJ's lifelong collection of antique tobacco tins, shooting the breeze and trying to guess the temperature as snow fell outside. Lenny was the first to see the customer walk in.

"You got business, CJ," Lenny said, tugging his ponytail and giving CJ a go-for-broke grin.

CJ nodded, realizing as the man approached and McCabe's grin softened into a stare that the nervous, gaunt man, whom CJ pegged to be nineteen, tops, was only the fourth customer of the day. He had melting snowflakes clinging to a cowlick of jet-black hair that draped down over a bulbous forehead that dwarfed the rest of his face. He wore a lightweight winter coat and a backpack. He breezed past all the displays without so much as a glance, eyed Lenny dismissively, and turned to CJ.

Before either CJ or Lenny could speak, the hostile-looking teenager said, "Your ad in the yellow pages says you deal in Western collectibles. I have a couple I want to sell. High-grade stuff, guaranteed. Now, who's Ike?" He grinned slyly at McCabe and then CJ.

The words sounded rehearsed. It wasn't every day that a brash, pumpkin-headed teen, sporting a hint of a goatee and barking demands in a thick Spanish accent—or anyone else for that matter—marched into any store on Antique Row and offered to guarantee what they were selling. Lenny, looking surprised and agitated, shot CJ a look that said, *Watch yourself, rookie; whatever the kid's peddlin' is probably stolen or fake.*

"Whattaya selling?" CJ asked finally.

The young man slipped out of his backpack, slammed it down on the display case, and unzipped it. Rummaging around in the backpack as if prolonging the search for effect, he extracted his wares. "Books. And don't try to take me. I know what they're worth." He placed two books gingerly on the countertop.

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CJ suspected that the round-faced man, whose eyes angled skyward, accentuating their whites, was older than he'd first thought. He couldn't tell if the man was bluffing, but he knew for sure that his fourth customer of the day had attitude to burn and that the Spanish accent he was anchored to screamed, *Not from around here!* CJ eyed the two books casually, feigning lack of interest, and glanced toward the store's front window. It had stopped snowing, and someone outside, clad in a parka, hands cupped above their eyes, had stopped to admire the inkwell and tobacco tin displayed in the window. The person quickly disappeared as CJ turned his attention back to the books.

The larger of the two books, nine and a half by six and a half inches and bound in buckskin, intrigued him, primarily because there was no title on the front cover. Two initials, an M lying on its side and an adjacent D, were stamped into the buckskin where a title should have been. The name "Harvey T. Sethman" was embossed in gold near the bottom. CJ nudged the book aside and tried not to salivate as he moved his attention to the second, smaller book. He had recognized it the instant the customer had set it down on the counter. Although license plates were his passion and inkwells and tobacco tins among his well-researched specialties, he had no trouble recognizing a cattle-brand book when he saw one, and the 1883 Wyoming brand book sitting in front of him was as pristine an example of a rare and collectible cattle-trade gem as he'd ever seen. He had a rough idea of its worth, and he'd have known its value to the penny if his friend Billy DeLong, onetime foreman of Snake River Valley Ranch in Baggs, Wyoming, had been there. CJ picked the brand book up and gently turned the pages, eyeing column after column, page after page of cattle brands, owners, names, and addresses as the

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nervous seller and an impatient, obviously perturbed McCabe looked on.

“Where did you get them?” CJ asked finally as the gears in his head shifted from antiques dealer to hungry-bail-bondsman wary.

“They belonged to my uncle. He’s dead.”

“Was he a rancher?” asked CJ, nudging the brand book aside, flipping open the other book’s cover, and reading the author’s front note: “This book is number seventy-eight of a special limited edition of three hundred copies of *Medicine in the Making of Montana*, hand-bound in buckskin and identified with the registered brand of the Montana Medical Association. This edition was commissioned by the Association for the benefit of its members and friends.”

“You from Montana?” CJ asked, now aware of the significance of the initials branded into the buckskin. “Lazy MD,” he said to Lenny, handing him the open book so that McCabe could read the front note.

“Makes sense. But I would’ve chosen Rockin’ MD myself.” McCabe’s attempt at levity seemed forced. Eyeing the seller suspiciously, he put the book down.

Ignoring McCabe, the man looked at CJ and said, “No. Venezuela—my uncle ran a cattle ranch down there.”

Uncertain whether the man was lying, CJ asked, “You got any proof?”

“Have you got proof that you own what’s in this store?” the young man said without flinching.

CJ eyed the man pensively. “You got a name?”

The boy swept the books back toward his backpack without answering.

“Possession’s nine-tenths of the law,” McCabe interjected.

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“And stealing’s a crime,” CJ countered.

“I didn’t steal them,” the man said adamantly. He had zipped up his backpack and turned to leave when CJ, wanting to take back the words as soon as he’d uttered them, asked, “How much do you want for them?”

“Eighteen hundred.”

Pegging the brand book’s value at \$2,500 to \$3,000, CJ said, “I’ll give you fifteen.”

“Seventeen.”

CJ looked quizzically at McCabe, then watched as the seller flashed McCabe a bold, cocky smile—a smile that said, *Stay the hell out of this deal, friend.*

Taking the hint, McCabe said, “You’re on your own, CJ.”

“You’ll have to take a check,” CJ said haltingly to the nervous man, as if he were looking for a way to squelch the deal.

“Cash only,” the man retorted.

“I don’t deal in cash with these kinds of transactions. Your books could be knockoffs.”

The man laughed. “I’ll take my books and leave, señor.” His cheeks reddened and he took a step toward the front door before McCabe said eagerly to CJ, “I’ll spot you the seventeen hundred. Write me a check.”

“Too risky,” CJ countered.

McCabe shook his head. “Balls, man. Balls. In this business you gotta have ’em.” McCabe eyed the seller for a reaction but got none.

CJ stroked his chin and considered the scores of life-threatening situations he’d found himself stuck in during two tours of Vietnam and thirty years as a bounty hunter and bail bondsman. *No risk, no reward*, he thought. Concerned that he might be losing the edge

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that had always defined him, he reached for the inside pocket of his black leather gambler's vest, a wardrobe trademark, extracted his checkbook, hurriedly wrote out a check for \$1,700, and handed it to McCabe.

"I'll have the cash for you in a couple of minutes," said McCabe, folding the check in half, slipping it into his shirt pocket, and heading for the front door.

The customer watched McCabe walk away, his eyes locked on every footfall until McCabe disappeared. He and CJ looked at one another in silence for a moment; then, eyes glued to the floor, the young man walked across the room to examine CJ's porcelain-license-plate display.

An arc of bewildered relief had spread across the man's face when they'd finally closed the deal. It was a look CJ knew well—the same bewildered look he'd given Ike when his uncle had come home broke, disoriented, and quivering after two nights of drinking and gambling. A look of detached disappointment that leaned heavily on the fact that the bearer carried a burden much heavier than should ever be expected of him. CJ wondered what burden the boyish-looking man was carrying—and, more importantly, for whom.

Ponytail swinging, Lenny returned with a wad of rubber-banded hundred-dollar bills. He walked the length of the store past the bookshelf and back to CJ. The book seller returned to the display case and watched, smiling, as Lenny counted out seventeen bills.

"We good to go?" he asked, placing the books he'd again slipped from his backpack on top of the display case.

"Yeah." Struck by how out of place the uniquely American phrase sounded in the man's thick Spanish accent, CJ handed over the stack of hundreds.

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Without recounting them, the man shoved the bills into his pocket. "My pleasure." Turning to leave, he took one of CJ's business cards from a card holder on the countertop, eyed McCabe dismissively, and retreated.

"Want a receipt?" CJ called after him.

The man didn't answer. Within seconds he was at the front door, greeted as he exited by a new shower of heavy, wet snowflakes.

CJ watched the man move past the front window before sliding the two books toward him. Looking at Lenny in full-choke puzzlement he asked, "Whattaya think? Stolen?"

Lenny shrugged. "You never know in this business."

"Thought I left those days behind when I got out of the bail-bonding business."

"Could be you didn't." There was a hint of playfulness in McCabe's tone as he slipped CJ's check back out of his pocket, snapped it, and said, "But I'm sure as hell good to go."

CJ nodded, opened the brand book, and began flipping through its pages. "Two for the money," he said, reaching page thirty. "Thanks for fronting me the seventeen hundred."

McCabe smiled. "Had to in order to protect my interests. I need a tenant who's making money."

"No shit," said CJ, surprised by the seriousness in McCabe's tone. "I should make a nice little piece of change on the cattle-brand book." CJ eased the book aside, eyed its partner, the Montana medicine book, and shrugged. "This one, though, like they say, you never know."



The windshield of the Volkswagen his mother had leased for him

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was covered with snow by the time Luis Del Mora had made the eleven-block trek from Ike's Spot back to where he'd parked the car in an alley. He had intentionally parked almost a mile away from the store, fearful that nearby on-street parking would have made him too visible, vulnerable to being seen by someone who might recognize him or the car. He had angled the lime-green Beetle into a narrow space between two garages, well out of the way of the alley traffic.

He cleared the windshield with a swipe of his jacket sleeve, looked skyward at the approaching darkness, patted the two wads of bills in his pocket, CJ's \$1,700 and the tightly packaged four-inch-thick \$10,000 roll beneath it, and turned back to unlock the door.

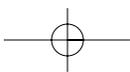
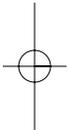
The book sale had been easy—much easier than he'd expected. And to think that selling the two books had been an afterthought, an add-on to his earlier sale. He broke into a self-congratulatory grin, thinking that the black man at Ike's Spot showed that African Americans seemed just as eager for money as their green-back-grubbing white counterparts. His sales had been brisk for the past month, and he had no reason to expect they wouldn't keep rising. He swung open the door, slipped inside the Beetle, and cranked the engine. He'd just started to back out into the alley when a wash of light filled the Volkswagen. He looked back to see a vehicle blocking his way. He waited briefly for it to move. When it didn't, he swung his door open, stepped out of the car, and said, "Hey!"

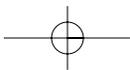
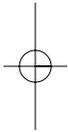
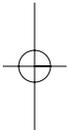
Luis Del Mora never uttered another word. Two close-range, silenced shots from a .22 Magnum pistol jutting from the vehicle's window made certain of that. One bullet ripped apart his windpipe, ultimately lodging deep in his cervical spine. The other



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shattered the delicate cherubic bone of his forehead before gyrating end over end through his brain. There would be no more words, no more book sales, and no more four-inch-thick wads of money for Luis Alejandro Del Mora.





**CHAPTER 3**

Celeste Deepstream had been cultivating Alexie Borg for months, hoping to get the once high-profile Russian hockey player to kill for her, and now she was close. As close as Alexie was, as he enjoyed the final titillating seconds of making love to her, to reaching a climax. “Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, yes, yes, yes!” he screamed.

“Alexie, you’re squeezing me too tightly. I can’t breathe.” Celeste’s words came out in a gasp as all 250 pounds of the gyrating Soviet transplant collapsed onto her and Alexie spent himself.

His face a contorted mask of erotic pleasure, Alexie released his bear hug.

“Get off me!” Celeste screamed.

Floating on a sea of pleasure, Alexie rolled from on top of the onetime Miss Acoma Indian Nation and former world-class swimmer and flopped spread-eagled onto the bed. “You’re something,” he said, exhaling. “A woman to make a man forfeit his dreams.”

For Celeste, the feeling wasn’t mutual. In all their months of lovemaking, Alexie had brought her to climax only once. He was burly, rough, and unschooled in the ways that made woman release their juices. But he was necessary—a cog that counted. He was a brutal oaf at best, but he would be her conduit to eliminating CJ Floyd, the man who had stolen her life, so in the long run it was Alexie Borg who would service *her* needs.

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Relaxing onto a pillow and propping himself up, Alexie ran a rough, callused hand along Celeste's inner thigh until he reached the sweet softness that had given him so much pleasure. "This you Indians should mass-produce." He capped the remark with a snort and a less-than-gentle squeeze.

Celeste responded with a string-along smile.

Alexie frowned, recognizing the smile for what it was. "What? Alexie's not good enough for you?"

"You're plenty," Celeste said, her words programmed and robotic.

Alexie inched himself farther up in the bed and, running his eyes up and down Celeste's exquisite body, scrutinizing every inch of her as if there were parts he believed he owned, said, "You remember, of course, the wreck you were when I found you? Are you now so far removed from that wretched state that you no longer feel the need to service me?"

Celeste answered with silence, vividly remembering the state she'd been in when Alexie had found her. She had been depressed and recovering from wounds she'd suffered in a shoot-out with CJ Floyd in the New Mexico Sangre de Cristo mountains. She had been forty pounds overweight, a fugitive, and barely in touch with reality as she'd moved back and forth between Taos, New Mexico, and the surrounding mountains. Alexie had dropped out of the sky to save her from herself and temper her long-festering grudge against Floyd—but only temporarily.

She had been a University of New Mexico world-class swimmer and a recently selected Rhodes Scholar poised to study anthropology at the University of London when a collision between her drug-addicted twin brother, Bobby, and Floyd had derailed her plans. Her dreams had been swamped because of Floyd, and because of Floyd, Bobby was dead.

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Thirty-two years earlier she and Bobby had been born six minutes apart on a kitchen table in a crumbling two-room Acoma Indian reservation adobe. All her life Celeste had been stronger, smarter, and wiser than Bobby, miles ahead of her brother in all the things that mattered, ascending as he spiraled downward. It was as if the couplet of DNA she had sprung from had harbored all of life's richest components, while Bobby's had been stripped bare. Until the day he died, Bobby's one claim to fame had been that he was the oldest.

She had turned down the Rhodes Scholarship to spend time detoxifying Bobby, who had been strung out on Ritalin, Percocet, alcohol, and model-airplane glue, and in time Bobby had won that war with drugs. But her painstaking intervention had transformed her from caring sister into Bobby's permanent crutch, and the bond between them, though no less tenacious, had degenerated into an unhealthy codependency fueled by Bobby's instability and her deep sense of guilt.

And then had come Floyd, an unrelenting bounty-hunting bear of a black man hired to track down her now dried-out, bond-skipping brother, who'd turned his talents to the work of a small-time fence. Floyd had tracked Bobby across two states before hog-tying him in chains, dumping him in the back of a pickup, and hauling him from Santa Fe to Denver to face charges of transporting stolen weapons and illegal fireworks across state lines.

While awaiting trial Bobby had tried to kill himself in the Denver County Jail. Guilt-ridden and enraged, Celeste had unmercifully beaten the seventy-five-year-old skinflint bail bondsman who had hired Floyd to track down Bobby, blaming that man for her brother's plight. When the old man had died from his injuries, Celeste had received a plea-bargained manslaugh-

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ter conviction that had earned her a twelve-year prison sentence. She'd never again seen Bobby alive.

With five years of model-prisoner check marks next to her name, chits that included saving a prison guard's life, teaching college-credit courses to inmates, and founding a Native American prisoners' prerelease job opportunities program, she'd masterminded an early release, dumping buckets of remorse around the room at two critical parole hearings and playing the role of a long-suffering sister forced all her life to shoulder responsibility for her bad-seed twin. She was paroled after serving just under half of her original sentence.

She had tried to kill the brown-skinned, square-jawed, wiry-haired bail bondsman Floyd half-a-dozen times, but she'd always failed. This time she was determined not to. This time she had Alexie, a Russian bear who had briefly moved with her from Taos to the sparsely populated White Sands Missile Range country outside Alamogordo, New Mexico, far from the law and any hint of limelight. A man who had been forced to America by the fall of communism to seek the good life he had enjoyed as a pampered Soviet athlete. Now, as a member of an elite arm of the Russian mafia, he fenced stolen airplane parts, illegal weapons, and medical contraband and smuggled rare art objects and priceless tapestries.

*No pain, no gain*, Celeste thought, responding finally to Alexie's question by reaching down and cupping his penis. "I'm not too far removed from anything," she said, skating an index finger back and forth across his testicles. "I just had a temporary lockdown because of Floyd."

"You lock down far too often over the bail bondsman, and always it seems to occur in the midst of our lovemaking. I have told you, I, Alexie Borg, will handle this."

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Celeste sat up in bed. "I've told you before, Alexie, Floyd's no longer a bail bondsman. Problem is," she hesitated momentarily and frowned, "he's just as shrewd and probably just as fearless."

Alexie smiled. It was the secure smile of someone with inside dope. "But he's American. He has weaknesses."

"Not the Sundee woman, if that's what you're thinking. I've tried that route already, remember?"

"Close," Alexie said with a chuckle.

"What, then?"

Running his finger in a circle around one of Celeste's firm, ample breasts, he said, "His possessions. The precious inventory he houses in that store he calls Ike's Spot."

"Floyd's the one I want eliminated," Celeste protested, grabbing Alexie's finger. "Not a store full of junk."

Alexie slipped his finger out of her grasp and licked it sensuously. "In Russia we have a saying: 'Some pigs must die at the trough.'"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I will soon have an international present for your Stetson-wearing African American cowboy. One that will be delivered to Ike's Spot, the trough that he eats from. A message that will be delivered directly from the Middle East."

"How soon?"

"Tomorrow. Perhaps the day after." Alexie slipped an arm beneath Celeste, forcefully rolled her on top of him, and ground his body into hers, quickly bringing himself to a new state of hardness. Within seconds he had slipped inside her.

Preparing herself for Alexie's spastic, cumbersome onslaught, Celeste kept thinking, *No pain, no gain*, recalling words that had once been part of an athletic training mantra that had driven

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her to Olympic-caliber level. It was a mantra she repeated to herself in silence as, ignoring Alexie's grunts and plunges, she envisioned the death of CJ Floyd.



Rare collectible finds always kept CJ preoccupied, to the point of often interfering with his sleep. Unearthing, researching, authenticating, and cataloging a rare porcelain license could consume him for days. So it wasn't unusual to find him at one a.m. trying to put a collector's face on the two books he'd bought. He was seated at the eighteenth-century French partner's desk that Mavis had given him the day he'd opened Ike's Spot. As CJ had watched Morgan Williams and Dittier Atkins, two down-on-their-luck former rodeo stars who had done odd jobs and a little surveillance for him when he was a bail bondsman, struggle into Ike's Spot carrying the 350-pound desk, he'd asked Mavis why such an expensive one. She'd said, "So you can do the authentication research you've always done on your kitchen table in style."

He had pretty much wrapped up dealing with the 1883 Wyoming cattle-brand book, having called his friend, the former ranch foreman, Billy DeLong, in Baggs, Wyoming, for the long and short of it. The now teetotaling, wiry, rough-cut sixty-five-year-old, who'd lost his left eye to diabetes and Old Crow, had said, "A 123-year-old book full of cow tattoos, now, that's sayin' somethin'." CJ knew he had a real find when Billy, a man prone to understatement, had told him the book was probably worth about five grand. CJ had screamed, "No shit!"

Aware that the brand book wasn't the kind of item he could put out in the store for looky-Lous and kids with Popsicle hands to paw over, he had priced the book, given it an inventory num-

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ber, slipped it into a small safe in the doorless, unpainted cubby that served as his office, and moved on to the Montana medicine book.

CJ assigned *Medicine in the Making of Montana*, by Paul C. Phillips, published in 1962 by the Montana Medical Association and the Montana State University Press, inventory number 301 and the shorthand log-in name *The Lazy MD*.

The book opened with a preface on the history of the medical practices of Montana Indians in the 1830s and moved on in the first chapter to document a list of the medical supplies carried by the members of the Louis and Clark expedition, but what caused CJ to puzzle as he flipped page by page through the 564-page volume was not what was contained within the book's bound buckskin boards but what was missing. The front and back panels and the book's first and last pages opened into two identical buff-colored, center-creased maps of Montana. The map in the front of the book that showed the territories of a host of Montana Indian tribes looked original and pristine. The end map, however, had been damaged, and pieces of yellowed cellophane tape and fragments of what appeared to be either string or fishing line clung to the tape as it crisscrossed the map in a perfectly centered X. The string or line appeared to CJ to have at one time secured something to the back board. A barely visible note printed in lowercase letters near the upper right-hand corner of the map read, *page 298, Covington*.

Intrigued, CJ flipped to page 298 and began reading. The page began with a discussion of the election of a recording secretary to the Helena, Montana-based medical association before going on two paragraphs later to describe in dry, succinct terms the life of Jacob L. Covington:

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*Dr. Jacob L. Covington left little record of his early life, but from accounts of his younger brothers and other family members, he was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1838. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1860 and practiced in Pennsylvania until 1866, when he moved to Helena. The reason he gave for the move was that he was attracted by the climate. In 1868 he moved to Laramie, Wyoming, to become a doctor for the Union Pacific Railroad. He worked for the Union Pacific from 1868 until 1870 but returned to Helena the next year and established his living quarters and office in the St. Louis Hotel. Covington, an avid photographer, worked and lived at the hotel until it burned down in 1880. The doctor narrowly escaped death by sliding down a pillar to the street, but his 470-volume library and his surgical instruments were destroyed, along with most of his photographs.*



CJ reread the paragraph, deciding after the second reading and a perusal of the biographies of a dozen other doctors that there was nothing unusual enough about Covington's background, education, medical practice, or life's tragedies to distinguish him from the hundreds of others described in the book, many of whom had had hobbies that had ranged from ornithology to fly fishing, and most of whom had been educated back East. There was one thing that was strikingly different about the Covington biography, however: the entire bio had been underlined perfectly, and almost imperceptibly, in pencil. CJ flipped to the book's endboard and tried to match the underlining with the notation that had been

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penciled on the map of Montana, but he couldn't. He reread the biography a final time. Assured that he hadn't missed anything, he shrugged, closed the book, and nudged it aside, convinced that the Wyoming cattle-brand book had been the real find of the day.

He checked his watch and decided that one-forty would have to be the witching hour for the day. He thought about whether he should put the book he now thought of as *The Lazy MD* in the safe with the brand book. Deciding it wouldn't hurt, he walked over to the safe, knelt, and ran the combination. As he held the door open, he had the feeling that he'd missed something important in the book. He had noted that except for one minor page tear, some smudges, and three or four barely perceptible page crimps, the book appeared almost as pristine as the day it had been printed. He slipped it into the safe, wondering as he closed the door why he was so drawn to a drily written book on the history of medicine in the nation's third-largest state when he probably should have been more concerned about whether the book or its companion had been stolen, and whether the cops and the rightful owner would descend on him, confiscate his finds, and charge him with trafficking in stolen merchandise.

He rose and dimmed the store's lights, ready to head for Bail Bondsman's Row and home. Donning his Stetson and slipping on his jacket, he stepped outside to be greeted by a warm chinook breeze. The temperature had risen twenty degrees since the young man with the books had walked into Ike's Spot on a rush of frigid air. *Springtime in the Rockies*, CJ thought, heading for the sagging poor excuse for a garage where Lenny McCabe allowed him to park his 1957 drop-top Chevrolet Bel Air each morning. He slipped into the Bel Air, considered the day's events and the



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rapid double-digit rise in temperature, and shook his head, thinking, *Rocky Mountain weather—you never know what to expect.*

