



THE **32**ND OF DECEMBER

JAMES BRADBERRY

A NOVEL

The 32nd of December

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For Olivia

PROLOGUE

Thursday, December 31 • East of Moorefield, West Virginia • 11:57 PM

The car moved tentatively against the darkness, faint headlights in an ocean of black. It was climbing through strong wind and heavy snow, not far below Helmick Rock, a three thousand foot peak of heaping sandstone, part of the eastern wall of the South Branch Potomac Valley. The snow had been coming for several hours, cutting down in sheets of white. The twisting road would have been difficult to drive at night under normal conditions, much less in a raucous snowstorm.

He hoped that the road would be passable. If it were, it would carry him over the high ridge and back down in the direction of Lost River, just beyond Fouts Knob. Somewhere on the other side was the crash site, which even now, a year later, was marked as a bare scar gouged out of the mountain forest, scraped to gray rock like a strip mine.

Beyond the reach of the car's headlights — twenty yards maybe — was a veil of darkness. Through it he could now make out the intersection of a smaller side road. Not a road really, more like an indentation in a fabric-fold of white. He tested the brakes and the car slowed and he turned between two snowdrifts. He accelerated up a long rise, crested the ridge and started down the other side.

It was then that he saw the deer.

It had come from the darkness, leaping to a spot in the center of the roadbed. The headlights branded its tan and white body, and a graceful leap instantly became stock stillness. Its Audrey Hepburn head turned slightly, and two perfectly spherical eyes reflected the car's headlights.

He braked but the car didn't respond. It barely changed course, fishtailing now, the hood at two o'clock, the trunk at eight. He jammed the brakes harder. The rear fender met the deer's flank and it dropped from sight. The car bounced off, continuing on. It was coming to a curve, descending, gaining speed. In a matter of seconds he was off the road, barreling down a snowy shoulder. Rocks clawed at the car's chassis and branches slapped its windows. A tree was ahead, nearly half the width of the car itself. Beyond was a twenty five hundred foot drop to the valley floor. The tree entered the driver's consciousness like a hallucination, yet with a clarity all its own. Framed in the headlights, he could see its elephant-skin bark as if it were under a magnifier. He could make out the precise size of a large teardrop-shaped knot in the trunk. He could almost tally the number of snow-frosted needles on its lowest branches. In short, he could see it clearly.

What he couldn't see clearly, or at least what he wouldn't later remember, was the car that was a hundred yards behind him. The one that had been following him. The one with his pursuer inside.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

He opened his eyes and it was like throwing a switch, a mechanical relay that turned on pain.

Before him was a lightning bolt, white and sharp and jagged. Beyond the lightning bolt the leg of an elephant, not any leg, but one the diameter of an oil drum. Against the elephant's leg, an enormous piece of blue paper, folded into an origami-like design. He closed his eyes and slowly opened them again. This time he could place the pain. In his head, as if he had been cold-cocked by a sledgehammer. Deep inside his knees, which felt as if they had been cleaved to the bone.

It was dark and some kind of light illuminated the elephant's leg. Beyond was confectioner's sugar, which he recognized to be snow. Eyes back to the elephant's leg and it's not a leg at all. It's the trunk of a tree. The blue origami — the accordioned hood of a car. The lightning bolt — a long crack in the car's windshield. Steam billowed up and surrounded the trunk and the air was infused with acidity. Short breaths fogged the windshield. He looked out the window to his left. It was snowing — snowing hard in confetti bursts of white. The car was on a slope in a thicket of trees. Below him the slope became steeper still and disappeared from view. He realized that the tree trunk had probably saved his life.

The car's dashboard glowed. The light cast on a fabric in his lap, a deflated air bag. The clock on the dashboard read 12:19 AM. He felt a warmth down below, and then he remembered his knees. The dashboard pressed hard against them, as if somehow they had halted the progress of the tree. A crimson smudge stained one pant leg. In the rear-view mirror he caught his reflection. It must have been his reflection because it moved when he moved, but he didn't recognize the face or the short blond hair.

He heard a shuffling outside, though the sound seemed to only penetrate one ear. Closer now, something moving in the snow. The driver side door was opened and the cold and the wind swept in.

A male voice said:

"Get out."

It was an order, for sure, but said without malice.

He tried to get out but couldn't. He removed his keys from the ignition and slipped them into his jacket pocket. A gloved hand reached in and unbuckled his seat belt and grabbed him hard by the collar of his jacket. He was pulled out onto the ground and had to drive his knee into the snow to keep from falling over. The gloved hand took him by the chin and tilted it upward. He could just make out the face above him. It had a stiff mouth above a cleft chin. The man was dressed in black.

"Mr. Beck," he said. "Welcome back to the world."

The man had called him Beck but the name meant nothing to him. The hand then cupped the back of his head and drove it down into the snow. With force. *With* malice. Suddenly, he felt a ribbon of nausea inside. And just as soon as his face was in the snow, he was jerked back up by his jacket collar.

"Empty your pockets," the man said.

He complied best he could. He was sure now that he could only hear out of his left ear. He offered up a wad of bills and some coins. A couple of folded pieces of paper and a small pocketknife.

"Now your wallet."

He looked up the slope. A white Land Rover was perched at the edge of a road, just where tire ruts in the snow led down to where he was kneeling. There was a tree. He had been in an accident. *And this person's robbing me*, Beck thought.

"Your wallet, I said."

He tried to pull it from his rear pocket but couldn't. The man slipped his hand beneath Beck and took it. He pulled a card from the wallet. His mouth widened into a grin. His teeth were yellow.

"Mark ... Rush," he said, and it was clear that he was reading from the card. "120½ North Bolton Street, Wellstone, West Virginia."

He dropped it to the snow. It was a driver's license. But if it came from his wallet, was it his? The man had called him Beck. Was he Beck or was he Rush?

Beck picked it up. The man then pulled a photograph from the wallet. It was of a pretty young woman. Muscular arms, feet against an orange rock wall, fingers dug into crevasses in the rock. Dozens of clips — no carabineers — hanging from her belt. Tousled brown hair, sharp features. Her head turned awkwardly to acknowledge the camera, a smile that seemed to say, *get the hell out of here*. Sunlight bathed the stone behind her, and for some reason Beck felt that he knew the rock, that he had been there when the picture was taken.

"She's what this is about, isn't she, Beck? Anna? She's the reason you got into this, the reason you put yourself into this position."

His eyes stayed on the photograph, as if the longer he looked at it, the more it would reveal itself to him.

"I don't uh I "

"You changed your name to Rush. Disappeared. Three and a half months in a new life. You had to have known that we'd catch up to you. And all for what? She's dead. But it was still that important to you."

"Who — ? Who is she?" Beck said, his mind a knot of confusion. "Who are you? What do you want?"

None of this made sense. Once again he eyed the tree and once again he looked up to the white SUV on the road above them. It was snowing, and he must have lost control of the blue car. But he couldn't remember that. And he couldn't remember what happened before. He didn't know Beck or the woman in the photograph or Rush or this man.

"Where am I?" he said. "What happened?"

The man slid the photograph back into a plastic sleeve. He put the wallet in his pocket.

"Hey, what are you ?"

The man pulled a pistol from the back of his waist and brought it up to Beck's head. It had a cylinder beyond the barrel that looked to be a silencer.

"No!" he cried. "I don't know what's going on but I'm not this Beck. You've got the wrong guy."

It was then that Beck noticed a thinning of the man's lips, what might be a sneer, but ever so subtle. He felt the defeat of the situation. The man looked at him in silence. His black sweater was now flecked with snowflakes. With the gun he turned Beck's head until the end of the silencer barrel pressed against Beck's temple.

"You don't know what I'm talking about?" he asked.

"No. What did you say just now? That I'd changed my name? I'd disappeared? Why would I do that? You've got the wrong person, man."

"Ris is dead, Beck. Or about to be. It's over. Nothing's been published. Nothing's come out. As of today you don't exist. Ris doesn't exist. And the world goes back to spinning properly on its axis."

"You're not making sense."

"Then why are you up here, huh? On top of a mountain in the middle of a snowstorm?"

Beck could only shake his head.

"Let me tell you why. On the other side of this ridge is a clearing on the mountain. One hundred and twenty nine people dead. So it *is* about her whether you know it or not."

"I ... "

Once again the man pressed the gun against his temple.

"It's over."

With his thumb he unlocked the safety.

Beck closed his eyes, his head spinning, hurting, feeling as though it might fall off. It's over, the man had said. Okay then. Okay. Then do it.

* * *

Eva Granholt lifted her head from the pillow, instinctively clutching the neckline of her nightgown.

The room was black and she slept alone, except for the eleven year old Doberman Pinscher named Rusty lying crosswise atop the comforter at her feet. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Slowly she focused on the alarm clock on the nightstand next to the bed.

It was 1:17 AM — New Year's morning. A few hours after she had left the French Embassy, a few hours after leaving a decidedly younger and heartier crowd to celebrate *le Réveillon de la Saint-Sylvestre*. At her age she had long since given up on the necessity to stay up and ring in the New Year, much less carry on in celebration of Saint Sylvester, whom she had learned from a French businessman next to whom she had sat at dinner, was neither French nor a saint of any particular renown.

Granholt had excused herself and slipped away from the embassy ballroom after finishing her dessert, at just after eleven. A singer fronting a small orchestra was wrapping his baritone around *Les Feuilles Mortes*. Several couples were slowly spinning on the dance floor. Eight or ten guests, men mostly, were back at the bar, refueling for the second half of the night.

Part of her wished that she wasn't sixty six, that she too had sidled up to the bar. When she had first joined the Bureau in 1974, she wouldn't have hesitated to do so. Back then she was one of three female agents to graduate Quantico in its third year to admit women, and she had enjoyed being different, a female in a decidedly male FBI.

She hung out with the men, indulged their gallows humor, and she drank with them most nights of the week.

In short, she was liked, more or less one of the boys. She didn't climb the chain of command in short order, but she was consistently promoted. Granholt was now Deputy Assistant Director in the Criminal Investigations Branch, a position well up the FBI's food chain, one with enough political clout to move in certain circles, to get one invited to the French Embassy on New Year's Eve.

She had made her way out of the Embassy, catching a cab to her comfortable Georgian home in Bethesda. The drive north from Washington to Bethesda was one she normally enjoyed, a drive that she took most days from FBI Headquarters. Tonight, however, her head was hard against the headrest — eyelids heavy — half conscious and thinking of nothing but her bed. Tomorrow was a holiday, a chance to sleep in.

But now, in her bed, having been awoken by the sound of a phone, she wondered if she would be able to take tomorrow off. This would not be a personal call.

She threw back the comforter. The ring tone was that of her home phone. She padded across the bedroom to a far wall, to a desk. She picked up the phone. As it turned out, it was not a call related to Bureau business, at least not in the strict sense of the word.

"It's Childs," said a male voice on the other end of the line.

"I told you never to call this phone," she said.

"I know. I tried your cell. But I didn't think you'd want to wait to hear this. I've got news."

"What is it?"

"We found him. In West Virginia.

"Didn't I tell you? What did I *tell* you?"

"You said that he'd probably be in West Virginia. Or in the Maryland panhandle."

"Right. So Anders wasted a good deal of time. We should have had him weeks ago."

"I know. Sorry. But Anders has a track record. I wasn't going to tell him how to do this. Besides, it's only January 1st. If we take care of Beck and we take care of the reporter, then this thing is over. It's like it never happened."

"Do you believe that, Childs?"

"Yes ma'am."

"You say, *if* we take care of it. Beck's not dead?"

"I don't know. He left his place at a little before eleven. Anders followed him. It's pretty isolated out there. Mountainous. Anders' cell dropped me about an hour ago."

"So it *isn't* over then."

"Well, not technically. But Anders is good. Remember, he's the one who killed Limann in '08. After the Company had tried three times unsuccessfully."

"Is that a reflection on Anders? Or the ineptitude of the CIA?"

"Probably a bit of both."

"And what about the reporter? What's her name again?"

"Ris. Angelien Ris."

"What about her?"

“She’s right here in Washington. Under my nose, personally. I’m just waiting for the right time. If Anders confirms Beck, then she’s gone. But it’s got to be done cleanly. There may be others who know what’s up. We’ve tapped her office and apartment and she hasn’t given up anything. She never gave a line on him, that’s for sure.”

“Hope you’re right, Childs. Or this thing blows to hell.”

“Don’t worry about it. Like I said, right under my nose.”

“*Don’t worry about it*, you’re kidding, right?”

“No ma’am.”

“You let me know the moment something happens with Beck.”

“I will.”

“And Childs.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever call me on this line again.”

She hung up.

It was 1:32.

12:32 Illinois time. Childs had said he had tried her cell. Not her Bureau cell, she assumed, but her other phone, a private cell that she normally would have kept by her bed. Why didn’t she hear it ring?

She picked up the desk phone again and dialed. A second later she heard a ring tone, a faint snippet of a J.S. Bach minuet. When she reached the den the sound was louder and a weak light pulsed on the kitchen peninsula. She hit the off button on the handset and turned on the light in the dining area. Her cell was on the counter.

Granholt picked up the phone. She turned it on and ran through her contacts list until she found his number. By now, the Doberman had joined her. He was pacing in front of the terrace doors, his nails clicking on the tile floor. She dialed. While waiting for a ring tone she let the dog out, instinctively turning on the terrace lights. She realized it was late, but he had said call at any hour. After the fourth ring there was a voice on the other end of the line. It was Sidwell. He answered with a smooth voice that was singularly distinctive, a timbre so familiar that any ten year old in America could tell you whose it was. The voice of a former radio and cable TV personality turned politician. The voice of the representative from the 11th Congressional District of the state of Illinois. The voice of the President-elect.

* * *

The sound was faint at first, intensifying until Beck could sense that whatever it was, it was getting closer.

He was on his knees, in snow. Above him, from another time and place, a man held an object to his ear. It was a gun, he recalled. They were on a mountain, he didn’t know where, and the man was about to kill him.

Oddly, the man had now turned his attention away from Beck. He was looking up a steep embankment, looking in the direction of the noise. From out of the night a pair of light beams swept across the road above them, coming to a stop. Frantic snowflakes danced in the light, as thick as smoke.

The cold of the gun’s silencer left his temple.

The man's profile was framed by the light. He was older than Beck had thought earlier, mid-to-late forties. He had brown hair running toward gray and solid features. He wore his hair without a part, swept back from a receding hairline. His eyes were black, rodent eyes, nearly inscrutable.

Beck shifted his focus away from the face, and to the point above them toward the light. Someone had given Beck a reprieve. Someone in a vehicle up on the road.

* * *

The line went silent on Willis Childs' cell phone. He turned it off and set it on the coffee table, a table that reflected the glow of the half-dimmed halogen lights overhead. He eased back on the sofa and took a long slow swig on his Lagavulin Scotch, its smokiness lining his throat like warm asphalt. Across the room — not a room exactly, just a furnished space between two brick walls beneath the concrete loft ceiling — was a fifty-two inch television tuned to the Playboy Channel. The sound was down. The movie playing, a soft-core romp set in Las Cabos, was a rerun, but what else would be worth watching at 1:30 AM on the first day of the New Year?

Granholt had been her usual testy self.

He knew he had roused her from bed. That alone had been enough to set the terse tone of the conversation. She was brusque under normal circumstances, much less when woken up. There was something about Eva Granholt — a chip on her shoulder, a dislike of men maybe, even a disfavor of blacks — that grated on Childs. He endured it, he supposed, because she was a more than competent superior who appreciated his talent. After all, she had brought him in on the Gates Sidwell thing. She had taken a big chance on that. The chance that he wouldn't accept her offer, and instead maybe even turn them in. But she knew him. She'd felt him out slowly, giving it to him in bits and pieces. Never mind that it wasn't an FBI operation, or that only four people in the Bureau, including himself and Granholt, were privy to the details. It was to her way of thinking a justifiable operation, the saving of an American icon, Gates Sidwell, President-elect of the United States of America.

Childs liked being in the middle of things. He routinely worked 12 hour days, leaving little time outside the Bureau for the semblance of a life. In fact, since his divorce, work gave him something to focus on, a way to soften the memory of Lela. He knew that Granholt was just being thorough, that she was calculating. He had never particularly seen her as power hungry, but there was, in his mind, but one reason she'd hitched her wagon to Gates Sidwell's star, one reason she'd agreed to find Marc Beck. The risk was exceptional. If caught, she would not only be reprimanded, she would be indicted. And Childs would be indicted as well.

On the other hand, if she succeeded the reward would be great. Sidwell, once sworn in, would name a new Director of the FBI. It was no secret that Hamilton Knowles, a Republican, would be kicked to the curb and Eva Granholt would take the helm. And with her, Willis Childs, great grandson of a Virginia sharecropper, second in his family to graduate college, would be slotted quite high on the FBI organizational chart.

He could drink from the cup of power.

Washington, DC, was a big cup, with more than enough elixir to go around. And had Gates Sidwell done anything worse than scores of other politicians in the past? Perhaps he was too close to the cause of the deaths — to the crash — but how many presidents had bombed civilians, had started conflicts for political expediency, had ruined the lives of those around them?

The movie was just about over. Amazing when Childs thought about it, how mundane they could make sex appear in such an exotic locale. Still he'd watch the ending and finish his drink, then head to Georgetown to check on Ris, to be there in the morning.

CHAPTER 2

Anders slipped the pistol into the small of his back and covered it with his sweater. Thirty feet above them a vehicle had eased to a stop. The vehicle idled loudly. He heard a door open and a moment later a man appeared at the shoulder above them. He halted for a moment, and then started down the embankment. Anders sized him up. Late twenties. Blond beard and shaved head. His barn coat and jeans covered an abundant frame, and he kicked snow ahead of him as he descended.

"Ya'll alright?" he called as he approached.

This was a complication Anders didn't need. He'd been after Beck for four months and he had him now, in his custody, on an isolated mountain road. Beck was dazed and Anders could easily take him out. Should have taken him out before this yokel arrived. Instead, he was going to have to deal with this.

"I said, ya'll alright?!"

The young man slowed and took in Beck's car.

"Damn," he said. "I saw the deer up there. Anybody hurt?"

"My friend was lucky," Anders responded. "But I need to get him to a doctor."

The young man knelt in front of Beck.

"He needs to stay right here," he said. "Moving him might make things worse. I'm Volunteer Ambulance Corps, certified in first aid. Besides, Sheriff's going to want to know what happened."

He stood.

Anders hesitated for a moment, then stepped between him and Beck.

"Listen," Anders said. "My friend's been drinking. In fact, he's hammered. I'd rather not have the sheriff here. You understand that, don't you? New Year's Eve and all?"

The young man's gaze turned back to Beck, then upward. A woman was now standing at the edge of the road. Her dress fluttered in the spread of the headlights.

"But my wife's — she's already —" the young man said.

"Help me," Beck interrupted. "Help me, please."

* * *

Beck heard himself say something to the guy in the barn coat. He remembered the tree and the tire tracks that led down the slope and the pain. The young guy had come to his aid, but the man in black was trying to get rid of him. They'd been talking in whispers. What was it the man in black had told him? Something about Beck drinking. And yet he didn't think he had been drinking. The man had called him his friend. Was he a friend? For Christ's sake, try to remember.

Beck caught eye of a subtle outline at the man in black's waist. He recalled a gun, which just a few moments ago had been pointed at his head.

"Help me," he said again weakly. The two men were looking down at him now.

"Don't leave. He's not a friend."

"He's drunk," said the man in black. "I've never seen him this —"

"No!" Beck blurted.

"Who are you?" the younger man asked the man.

"My name is Anders. A-N-D-E-R-S. Don't forget that."

"What?"

"I don't know anyone named Anders!" Beck called.

"Come on, Beck," said the man. "Let's get him up to the road."

"NO!" Beck cried. "I am *not* going anywhere with him. Help me."

The young man's face was pink. He'd stumbled onto a hornet's nest.

"You let him go," he said.

Beck saw the man turn to the young man, anger in his ball bearing eyes.

"This is none of your business," Anders said.

"I'm making it so," said the young man. "He don't want to go with you."

"But he's going," said Anders. "He is."

The young man looked to the road above. His wife was still standing there awkwardly, cell phone in one hand.

"Did you phone them, hon?!" he called to her. The woman seemed a continent away. But she nodded.

"She's called 911," he said, in a defiant voice. "So this man ain't going nowhere with you."

Anders's expression didn't change at the news. He simply reached behind him and produced the pistol. He brought it up to the younger man's head. The gun made a faint spitting sound. A hole appeared in the young man's forehead. He fell into the snow motionless.

The woman let out a scream, and Anders quickened up the hill, through deep snow.

Beck's eyes followed Anders and locked onto the white SUV. If he could just reach it before Anders —

A faint sound against the wind.

It was the gun again.

Beck struggled to stand. He clawed his way up the embankment. He struggled over the rise to see the woman on her knees. She was in the headlights of a gold truck, her and her husband's truck, some twenty yards in front of her, idling in the middle of the road. She looked down to what appeared to be a wound to her abdomen. Beck cowered behind the Land Rover. Anders slowly approached her and it occurred to Beck for the first time that he was a professional killer. He could see it in his eyes, in the way he moved. He didn't know how he knew that, he just knew.

The woman's back was arched and she reached out towards Anders, her arms above her head, fingers spread wide as if she could conjure up some power to make to make him back away.

Anders then slowly raised the gun. There was nothing Beck could do for her. He realized that he had to do something for himself though. He yanked open the SUV's passenger door and slid over to the driver's seat.

And he watched as Anders took one of the woman's hands and pulled it to him. Gently almost, he then grasped her thumb and inserted it into the trigger guard. With his index finger Anders pushed slightly against the thumb, and it occurred to Beck that he intended for her to pull the trigger, intended for her to kill *herself*. She recoiled and began to cry loudly again, the sound rising and falling against the wind. Anders shook his head and again he took her hand, this time more forcefully. He placed her thumb

against the trigger once more and lowered the gun about four inches, such that it was pointed at her mouth. He then pressed it forward. Her lips covered the silencer. She'd given in.

The gun went off, and with it a spray from the rear of the woman's neck she fell back to the snow. Anders wiped the gun barrel and then turned in Beck's direction. Anders had taken a couple of steps toward the Land Rover when from behind him Beck suddenly saw the woman rise like a soul lifting from a dead body in a cheap horror movie. Somehow she staggered to her feet. Blood sprayed forcefully from her neck.

Anders didn't seem concerned with her now. Beck guessed him to be about forty feet away. The engine of the Land Rover was running, yet Beck couldn't will himself to put it into gear.

Behind Anders the woman was now moving toward the gold truck, though how, he couldn't say. She got to the truck and started it. Anders still paid her no attention. He was close to Beck now and Beck could feel the intensity of his rabid gaze. The woman threw the truck into gear. The engine revved and the truck lurched forward.

Slowly — methodically — Anders turned and raised the pistol and pointed it toward the truck.

He fired once, and then again, and then three times in succession. The truck veered towards a snow embankment on the other side of the road. The horn bleated loudly. The front right wheel hit the embankment first, and it tipped up like a boat going headlong into a large wave. Then slowly, it rolled to its side. Anders turned back to the Land Rover.

Beck knew it was now. He threw the vehicle into gear and pushed forward on the gas pedal. The SUV's wheels spun before getting traction. Anders once again raised the gun.

Though this time nothing happened. A magazine clip dropped from the pistol's grip. Instantly, another appeared from Anders' pocket. Anders drove it up into the grip but by now the Land Rover was past him. Beck jammed the gas pedal and snow flew out from behind the SUV. He flicked on the high beams, breathed in deeply, and felt the ripping of his heart. The rear windshield was covered in snow so he couldn't see behind him.

A half mile later he slowed.

He had no idea where he was. He could be on any snow-covered road on earth.

He heard a noise from behind him. Perhaps he had hit something, he thought. He shifted to park and opened the driver's door.

He walked to the rear of the vehicle.

From nowhere an object came towards him.

Anders had been clinging to the rear gate and roof rack. A fist caught Beck's chin and Anders' weight carried them to the ground. Beck landed hard on the small of his back, sending pain up his spine.

Anders' lips were sharp lines, the whites of his eyes madly crisscrossed with tiny red blood vessels.

"I'm going to get up," he said. "You don't move, fucker. Not an inch."

Anders pressed the silencer against Beck's forehead.

Slowly Anders sat up. Beck watched him carefully. Again, Beck realized he could hear out of just one ear. The wind was swirling, the snow coming sideways. He tried to steady his breathing. He tried to think of anything he could do.

It was then that Anders started to stand.

When he was near to his feet Beck pumped a shin up into his groin.

Anders doubled over. Beck rolled out from beneath him and popped to his feet. Without thinking he kicked him again, this time dislodging the pistol. It sailed a half dozen yards before disappearing in the snow. Anders recoiled, clutching his groin, but he quickly recovered. He came for Beck but Beck went low and caught him with a forearm at the knees, flipping him over his shoulder. Anders stood and came at him again, this time landing a fist across Beck's brow. Anders grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him hard toward the SUV. Beck's shoulder met the rear windshield, sending a ripple of pain down his right side.

Anders paused to catch his breath.

He then produced a pocketknife. Anders brushed back his hair. He started forward. Beck once again went low, this time with the full force of his body and Anders slipped.

His head had caught the fender above the rear wheel well.

He dropped cold.

Beck made for the car door. He jumped up into the driver's seat and put the Land Rover into drive. He drove fast and with purpose, never once looking back. In fifteen minutes he was down the mountain, just outside of Lost River, West Virginia. At least that's what the sign said.

It was then that Beck realized that there were things that he knew, and other things that he hadn't a clue about. He didn't know this town. He didn't know his name. He knew that a man Anders wanted him dead. Why, he couldn't say. Maybe if he knew who he was or how he had gotten on that mountain, it would be clear. But it wasn't clear. Nor was where he should go next.