

***Dying In Deer
Country***



Russ Heitz

A Jesse Eichenlaub Suspense Novel

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To Jesse's loyal fans —

Small in number,

Large in heart.

*Jealousy feeds upon suspicion,
and it turns into fury.*

—Duc De La Rochefoucauld

Chapter 1

He must have been leaning forward when it happened. The body was half on and half off the foot of the bed. The shoe on his right foot had no lace. His left foot was shoeless and sockless. Blue boxer shorts with green vertical stripes. A snowy undershirt. Half of his head had been blown away.

Black powder residue stained the base of his skull. The entry hole was small but the caliber must have been fairly heavy. Most of his face was splattered across the rumpled sheets, white fleece blanket, fake leather headboard, and part of the wall.

A wave of queasiness rolled through my gut as I glanced back over my shoulder. Klinkton County's Medical Examiner, Dr. L. Robert Helsey, was standing next to the open doorway, gray fedora, black overcoat. His tired grey eyes appeared to be filled with the same questions that pummeled my own brain.

Who had done this? And why?

Standing behind Helsey and peering into the room over his left shoulder were the ashen faces of two women. One was Charlene Stebbins, the acting manager of the Deer Hollow Inn. Her blue eyes were wide, blank, doll-like, with a heavy coating of blue mascara and black eyeliner. She was nervously twirling a strand of silver-blond hair whose dark roots were clearly visible. Her dark blue pant suit was a snug fit on a generous figure.

The other woman in the doorway was nearly as tall as the M.E. But unlike Helsey's gaunt, Abe Lincoln look, her

shoulders were broad for a woman, even though her hips and waist were narrow. She might have been a competitive swimmer twenty, twenty-five years ago. Her hair short and brown; she was wearing a slightly rumpled pale green maid's uniform.

"His name is Phillip Ritzo," Charlene Stebbens said, her voice shrill, her delivery rapid and breathless. "Was Phillip Ritzo. He's from Philadelphia. There was a woman staying with him, too. Right, Bree?" The other woman's nod was barely perceptible.

"I was afraid to look in the bathroom," Charlene hurried on. "Maybe the woman's dead, too. In there. Jesus what a mess. I hope we don't have to replace the mattress. Those things cost money. The boss'll—"

I broke in. "Did anybody hear anything?"

Charlene stared at me. "You mean like gunshots?" She shook her head. "Nobody said anything about that. Couple people complained last night about people yelling. But at this time of year the people who stay here are always yelling. It's deer season. You know what I mean? Hunters pour into this part of Pennsylvania from everywhere. Beered up and ready to roll."

I glanced at Helsey and then moved toward the door, my hand reaching for the knob. Helsey stepped aside.

"Deer hunters can get kind of rowdy," I admitted as I started closing the door. "But right now Dr. Helsey and I have work to do. So if you two ladies will wait outside I'll talk to you in a few minutes. Okay?"

The two women backed away as I eased the door shut in their faces. I turned toward the bed again and looked around. Another wave of nausea washed through my gut. I'd been on the job as the sheriff of Klinkton County for less than a month and I'd already seen more dead bodies than I'd ever seen in my life before.

"Not much doubt about what happened," I said. "Thanks for coming, Doc."

"Part of my job," Helsey said, moving closer. The pale rubber gloves stretched and snapped as he pulled them on. "Looks like an execution of some sort." As he moved to the side of the bed he grinned and nodded at my clipboard. "I see you took my advice. How about the camera?"

I jammed the new clipboard into my left armpit and pulled a pair of rubber gloves out of my own back pocket. Even though they were lightly powdered on the inside, it was still a struggle to get them on.

"I'll have Franky pick one up at Walmart. She said Sheriff Jackman couldn't be bothered with cameras. He was from the old school."

"Maybe that's why he's the ex-sheriff and you're the new sheriff," Helsey said with a lop-sided grin.

I shrugged. "Jackman was a popular guy. If it wasn't for the emphysema he'd still be the sheriff."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Helsey said. "Anyway, I have a camera in the car so I'll take a few pictures myself. When I get back to the office I'll have my secretary send copies to you as an e-mail attachment. But only on one condition."

"What's that?"

“That you send Franky out this afternoon—this afternoon!—and buy your office a camera. You’ve got to start keeping better records, Jesse. And nowadays, records include all kinds of things, but especially digital photographs.”

“Consider it done,” I said.

Helsey bent over the body again and placed a finger above the bloody ear. He pushed the head slightly to the side so he could see what was left of the face.

In the half-kneeling position that the body was in, it was hard to estimate how tall the man was but my guess was five-six, maybe a little bit less. He had one of those thick, fireplug-shaped bodies whose dimensions at the shoulders, waist and hips were all about the same.

The pale bare legs that stuck out of the blue boxers were covered with black hair. So were his arms. The same kind of hair sprouted forest-like from his armpits. The parts of his upper back that were not covered by the silky-looking undershirt were covered with hair. Some of the blood had seeped across his upper back, turning his back hair into a furry fuchsia mat.

My stomach rolled as I shook my head. “I don’t know how you can work with this kind of thing every day, Doc.”

Helsey moved the bloody head again and a piece of the skull beneath his fingers seemed to fall inwardly.

“I don’t,” Helsey said. “Most of the time the bodies I work with are overweight retirees who’ve had a heart attack. No blood. No guns. No violence.”

He looked back at me and grinned. “At least those are the kinds of bodies I used to examine till you became the sheriff.”

I returned the grin. “Things have been kind of hectic,” I agreed. “But I wouldn’t call it cause and effect.”

Helsey turned back to the body. “Did Charlene say there was a woman staying with this guy?”

I nodded. “Don’t know where she is now. I gave the bathroom a quick once-over when I got here and she’s definitely not there. But I haven’t checked it thoroughly yet. I’ll do that now while you’re busy with him.”

My stomach tightened as I moved toward the bathroom door. Red streaks and grey tissue were smeared thinly across the door’s snow-white panels. It looked as though someone had tried, half-heartedly, to clean up the mess.

The doorknob was shiny and black with no stains at all. So unless the shooter had wiped it clean, fingerprints were a possibility. If I had someone to take the prints.

Deputy Clay Letterman—my right hand man—had a lot of law enforcement experience, including dusting for prints. Unfortunately, Clay was still in the hospital with the shoulder wound he got from the case we wrapped up last week. Until he was back on his feet, Franky and I would have to muddle through this one on our own, fingerprints or not.

I nudged the bathroom door open with my foot and looked around. The room was small, narrow and empty but it definitely had an occupied look.

The sink counter was nearly covered with toiletries, both men’s and women’s. Shaving cream, dental floss, two

kinds of toothpaste, cologne, aftershave, pink and blue razors, condoms, depilatory cream, pill bottles, you name it.

The sink itself was spotless except for some soap residue left on the chrome drain. The chrome faucets glistened from the ceiling light. A white plastic trash basket was lying on its side next to the toilet. It was completely empty but there were several wadded-up tissues scattered beneath the toilet tank.

The bathtub had also been cleaned but not as thoroughly as the sink. The tiled wall had traces of color in the grout. Mold? Or dried blood.

The sides of the tub were streaky and there was a sandy residue on the bottom, as though someone had scoured it with a gritty cleanser. Several clear plastic shower curtain hooks had been snapped off but were still dangling from the rod. There was no shower curtain.

Chapter 2

The man's short stumpy body was still slumped over the foot of the bed when I came out of the bathroom. Helsey was taking pictures of it from different angles. I went outside to talk to Charlene and the other woman. Charlene introduced her as Brenda something-or-other and told me she had just started working at the Deer Hollow Inn a few days ago. As the cleaning lady.

"She prefers to be called Bree," Charlene added.

"You say you heard someone arguing last night?" I said, looking from one woman to the other.

Charlene turned to the cleaning lady. "Was it arguing, d'you think? Or just yelling."

The woman named Bree lifted her broad shoulders. "Lot of noisy hunters here last night. Hard to know what was going on."

I turned to Charlene again. "What time did you leave?"

"Last night? Eleven, I think. Came in at six. That's six a.m. These long days are getting to be a pain in the ass, believe me. Ever since the manager broke his leg. Did I tell you about that?"

I nodded. "Yeah, last week, when that other guy was shot outside your restaurant. Your manager slipped on some gravy, right?"

"Stupid ass," Charlene said.

I looked at the other woman. "How about you? What time did you leave last night?"

“We left together,” Charlene butted in. She glanced at the cleaning lady for a second. “Didn’t we?” The woman nodded.

“Either one of you see anything unusual when you left?” I said.

“Like what?” Charlene said.

“Like someone hanging around. Someone who shouldn’t have been here.”

Charlene grunted and frowned. “As far as I’m concerned, none of these jerks should be here. To tell you the truth, Sheriff, I hate deer hunters. Every last one of them. Macho creeps for the most part. Roll into Klinkton County from God knows where. Think they can do anything they want while they’re here. Think they own the whole goddam county. Including all the women in it.”

Charlene took a breath and then spread her hands. “Course they keep the money rolling in, too, so I guess I shouldn’t complain.” She looked at me. “That woman who was with the dead guy? She dead, too? In the bathroom?”

I shook my head. “Would you get me their names and addresses? Ritzo and the woman? Phone numbers, too. Credit card number if they used one. License number for their car. The kind of info you usually get when you sign someone in.”

Charlene’s back stiffened. “I don’t sign anyone in, Sheriff. Ted does that. I manage the restaurant.” She paused and then softened. “But I’ll tell Ted to get the info for you.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Charlene flashed a smile. “No problemo, Sheriff. By the way, can I get you some coffee? I’m sure the kitchen has a fresh pot.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “But I could use some scotch tape if you have it.”

“There’s a dispenser at the office,” she said. “I’ll bring the whole thing.” She paused for a second. “Oh. Is it all right if I put Bree back to work? A couple more hunters are supposed to arrive this afternoon and we need to ready-up our last two vacant rooms.”

I nodded. “If I have any more questions, I’ll come looking for you.”

* * * * *

I spent the next half hour going through the victim’s suitcase and wallet while Helsey continued to examine the body and dictate into a tiny recorder. The driver’s license gave the victim’s name as Phillip Joel Ritzo of 3256 Locust Drive, Philadelphia. Thirty-five years old. Unmarried. Brown eyes, black hair, five foot six.

I had lived in several different sections of Philadelphia myself while I was going to Temple University so I was familiar with Locust Drive. It was in a rundown edge of the Germantown area, in a section known for its well-developed drug trade. So I wasn’t surprised when I found some small packets of white powder among Ritzo’s possessions. I also found several vials of small brown misshapen crystal-like chunks; also probably drugs.

The assortment was all wrapped together in a pair of silky boxer shorts. The shorts were jammed into a bulky white athletic sock. And the sock was wedged into one of the two zippered pockets inside the soft and very expensive-looking leather suitcase.

“What do you make of this?” I said after I unwrapped everything and laid it on the dresser.

Helsey glanced at it and shook his head. “Drugs. Maybe that’s what this whole thing is about.”

“Could be.”

A faint pulsing of red and white lights washed across the closed drapes that covered the front window. “Looks like the EMTs are here,” I said. A moment later the door opened.

Duke Kull was probably in his late twenties; tall, thin, clean-cut. The only visible part of his green scrubs were the thin pajama-like trousers. Everything else was covered by a fairly heavy thigh-length coat.

“I left the gurney outside,” Duke said. His grin was shy. “Didn’t know if you were finished in here or not.”

Duke’s wife, Natty, came in behind him. A broad leather strap was slung across her narrow shoulders. Hanging from the strap and bouncing against her flat stomach was a huge square black-leather case. She, too, was wearing a long heavy coat. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold air.

“It looks like we’ll have to give you some kind of discount pretty soon, Sheriff,” Natty said smiling. “For all the business you’re throwing our way. How many bodies was it last week? Three? Four?”

I glanced at Duke and rolled my eyes. “Your wife is a very funny lady.”

Duke laughed. “That’s why I married her.” He glanced at the body. “Anyone we know?”

I shook my head. “He’s from Philly. Don’t know much more than that at this point. Except somebody didn’t like him.” I glanced at Natty’s big leather case. “You’re not going to need any of that stuff. He’s long past any help.”

“By the time we get to the scene they often are, but you never know.”

Duke moved around to the side of the bed where Dr. Helsey was crouched. He and Natty both looked at the bloody bed and walls.

“Anyone in there?” Natty said, tilting her head toward the bathroom door.

“Not right now. But it looks like there was, at some point. There was also a woman with this guy. Don’t know who she is. Or where she is either. The motel lady said this guy and the woman signed in yesterday. But nobody saw the woman leave.”

“Spooky,” Natty said.

Charlene suddenly appeared in the doorway. There was a tape dispenser in her hand and her eyes were even larger than before. Her breathless voice was irritatingly high pitched, her words rushed.

“You better get out here, Sheriff. Two guys are trying to kill each other in the parking lot.”

Chapter 3

Two pickup trucks were blocking the exit lane of the motel parking lot. The rear bumper of the green truck was almost touching the rear fender of the brown one. Both trucks had scope-mounted rifles racked across their back windows.

The red-faced drivers, who were nose to nose, were decked out in full camo gear, from their floppy broad-brimmed Aussie hats to their thick-soled canvas-topped camo boots. Both wore bulky camo-colored coats.

From a distance, they looked like they could have been brothers. But brothers don't usually shout obscenities at each other like these two. When they saw my badge the obscenities stopped abruptly.

"What's the problem, fellows?" I said.

One face turned white. The other got redder still.

"He backed right into me," White Face complained. "Stupid jerk."

Red Face cocked his arm and clenched his fist. "Who you calling a stupid jerk? Huh? You want a piece of this?" he said, waving his fist.

I planted a hand on each chest and shoved them apart. The rancid smell of stale beer and morning breath hung between them.

"You guys do have a choice, you know," I said. "One: I can haul you both off to jail for driving drunk and disturbing the peace. Or two: you can go inside, have three or four cups of coffee each, and then be on your way. You were planning to bag a couple deer today, weren't you?"

“What about my truck?” White Face said as the color began to seep back into his cheeks. He pointed toward his shiny brown left rear fender.

I squatted down, looked at the fender and ran my hand over it. I couldn’t see or feel anything but smooth metal.

Red Face snorted. “I never touched your freakin’ truck.”

I examined the green metal of Red Face’s fender and tailgate. “I don’t see anything wrong with either truck.”

“What’d I tell you?” Red Face growled. He grunted again and looked at the ground. “Freakin’ moron.”

“Look, give me a break,” I said, jerking my thumb toward the ambulance. “I got a dead man in that room over there and I need to find out who killed him.”

Both men stared at the Kull’s ambulance like they’d never seen one before. And then they gaped at me. “Somebody died?” White Face said.

“Not died. Murdered. Half of his head was blown off.”

“Jesus,” the other one said. “A guy was murdered right here? In this motel?”

I nodded. “So I really don’t have time to screw around with fender-benders that didn’t happen. Why don’t we just call it a draw and let it go at that, okay?”

“Jesus,” they both said in unison. I raised my eyebrows at both of them and each one nodded. “No problem, Sheriff,” Red Face said.

“Good,” I said and turned away.

I glanced back when I got to the motel room door. Both pickups were being repositioned at opposite ends of the

parking lot. Helsey was putting his camera into its case when I stepped back into the dead man's room.

"I'll e-mail the photos to you this afternoon," Helsey said. "But as soon as you get that camera I suggest you photograph the rest of this room yourself. The bathroom, too."

"How about the bullets? You'll need them too, right?"

Helsey nodded. "There should be at least one in the mattress. I found a hole in the fabric but my probe wasn't long enough. You'll probably have to cut the mattress to get at it."

"Charlene's not going to be happy about that."

Helsey shrugged and looked at the Kulls. "If you guys are ready to load up, just bring the body over to my place. Time to slice and dice."

* * * * *

After Helsey and the Kulls were gone, I gathered up the drugs I'd found in the victim's suitcase and put them into a brown paper evidence bag. I also added the guy's wallet and wristwatch. Then I got my Swiss army knife from the Bronco, pulled on another pair of rubber gloves and turned my attention to the mattress.

The fabric was still wet from the blood and tissue but the bullet hole was easy to find. Helsey must have gathered up the skull and facial fragments for the rest of his lab work. The hole was right in the middle of the darkest wettest stain on the mattress.

I unfolded the longest blade of my knife and started to probe the hole. But my blade wasn't long enough either so I went to the closet.

Most of the hangers were holding a colorful assortment of woman's clothing; skirts, blouses, slacks, nightwear. The rest of the hangers held two suit jackets, a couple grey shirts, and some extra pants.

Most but not all of the closet hangers were made of thick wood with chrome hooks. By feeling around the high closet shelf, however, I found one of the old-style wire hangers. I unwound the neck and then straightened the whole thing until I had one long piece of stiff black wire. That's what I used for a probe.

The bullet itself had gone almost all the way through the mattress. I got a flashlight from the Bronco and then slid under the bed on my back. With the flashlight propped against the side of my neck, I cut a few openings in the bottom of the mattress. In less than a minute, the bullet was in my gloved hand.

It was a bit mashed up after crashing its way out through Ritzo's skull. But I was hopeful the state police lab in Harrisburg could still get some useful information from it. I slipped it into a plastic baggy.

I decided to take Helsey's advice and return to Ritzo's room later that afternoon as soon as Franky got us a camera. After I took my own set of pictures with the new camera, and did one final check of the room, I'd take all of the personal effects of both Ritzo and the woman back to the office. When that was done I could turn the room back over to Charlene.

My stomach felt hollow and empty as I stepped out into the cold mid-morning air. I hoped I hadn't missed anything.

Chapter 4

After locking the motel room door, I fastened yellow crime scene tape across the entrance in an X pattern, using the Scotch tape that Charlene had brought to the room. I parked the Bronco in front of the restaurant and left the motor running while I went inside.

The crowd was large and Charlene was busy. I held the tape dispenser over my head for her to see and then placed it next to the cash register.

“Talk to you later,” I called out. She waved a menu and smiled.

As I pulled out of the parking lot I called my office assistant, Franky Boone, on the radio.

“Hey, Boss, how’s it going?” she said. Her voice sounded crackled and fuzzy.

I pushed the talk button. “Don’t know yet. The body’s on its way to Helsey’s office via the Kull’s ambulance, but now there’s a woman missing, too. She might be the victim’s girlfriend.”

“Think she was the shooter?”

“Don’t know. Oh, before I forget. Helsey has strongly recommended that our office get a camera. He says we need to start photographing crime scenes.”

“He’s right. I tried to convince Sheriff Jackman of that a long time ago. But he didn’t want to be bothered.”

“That’s what I told Helsey. Anyway, check our petty cash situation and see if we have enough to buy a Walmart camera.”

“I’m sure we do,” Franky replied. “I’ll go get one the minute you walk through the door. You on your way back?”

“I want to stop at the hospital first. See how our two patients are doing.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Call Commissioner Klink and tell him about the shooting. And tell him I’ll fill him in on the details as soon as I can. Anything happening back there?”

“Nope. Quiet as a midnight snow.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way. Dealing with only one murder at a time would be a nice change.”

“You got that right,” Franky said.

* * * * *

I pulled the Bronco into a slot near Mercy Hospital’s ER and walked through the holding area. There were already two guys there in hunting clothes. One was in a hospital wheelchair, his left leg wrapped in a yellow towel. A red stain was seeping through the towel.

The other hunter, grey-haired and overweight, was stretched out on a blue vinyl sofa. His unshaven face was grizzled and pale. His eyes were closed. A nurse was checking his pulse.

Several other nurses were moving briskly from one room to another, carrying supplies. Some were wheeling IV poles. Others were trying to maneuver heavy but empty beds. The hospital was definitely gearing up for the two weeks of insanity that was known locally as “deer season.”

Heart attacks, broken ankles, powder burns, knife cuts, accidental shootings, not-so-accidental shootings. Every year about this time, the ER was up to its crash carts with the walking and the not-walking wounded. Why should this year be any different?

I suppose that was the price of fame. In the past couple years, the mountainous areas of north-central and north-western Pennsylvania had definitely become hotspots for both state-wide and out-of-state hunters. And it wasn't just the white tail deer that drew hunters to the areas north and west of Glen Haven. It was black bear, elk, rabbits, snowshoe hare, groundhogs, pheasant, squirrels, turkey and coyotes.

Nor were slick, expensive, scope-mounted rifles the only weapons wildlife had to be wary of. They also had to watch out for muzzleloaders, flintlocks, compound bows, and more than a truckload of falcons. At this time of year, the motto of Klinkton County—and some of the other nearby counties—seemed to be very simple.

If it moves, shoot it. If it doesn't move, it's gotta be a rock.

I moved through the ER waiting area as quickly as I could. My deputy, Clay Letterman, had taken a round in his chest during the shootout that finally ended last week's chaos. He was very lucky. Another inch or so to the right, the doc said, and the bullet would have sliced through his aorta. And I'd be looking for a new partner.

I stopped at the nurses' station and asked how Clay Letterman was doing.

The short, chubby, red-haired nurse pulled his chart and rocked her head from side to side.

“The wound seems to be healing okay and that’s good. Because that’s not always the case with gunshot wounds. They can be tricky. His temp keeps going up and down, however. And that’s not so good. But we’re keeping an eye on him.”

She put the chart back in its slot and looked at me for the first time. She grinned and patted my arm. “I know you. I saw your picture in the paper last week.”

Then her eyes suddenly widened and she grabbed Clay’s chart again. “Omgod. Letterman. Of course. Clay’s your deputy. I’m sorry, Sheriff. It’s just that there are so many Lettermans living around here that I never ...”

“That’s okay. The question is, is this particular Letterman getting better?”

“And the answer to that is yes, Sheriff. Once we get that temp under control he’ll be as good as new. Well, in a couple weeks, anyway.”

“So it’s okay if I see him?”

“Oh, sure,” she said. “And stay as long as you want. Male patients get kind of cranky when they’re left alone too much.”

With a wave, I walked down the hall and entered the last room on the left. The head of Clay’s bed had been cranked up and several pillows had been placed beneath his upper left arm. His forearm was lying on another pillow that had been placed across his stomach. Several IV hoses were attached

above his wrist. His eyes were closed and his face looked flushed.

“Clay?” I said softly.

His eyes popped open immediately and his parched thin lips tried to form a grin. “Hey, Boss,” he said, trying to scoot himself a little more upright. He licked his lips and the grin broadened.

“How you feeling?” I said. “Nurse says you’re doing pretty good.”

“Yeah, well, she ought to know,” Clay said, blinking his eyes. “She comes around every five minutes and jams in another needle. Feels like I’ve been sleeping with a porcupine. How things going at the office? I’ve been hearing gunshots all morning.”

“The county’s crawling with hunters, of course. I saw two SUVs out at the Deer Hollow Inn this morning. Each had a buck roped across the hood.”

“Already? Any shooting accidents?”

“A couple guys down in the ER right now look like hunters but one of them appeared to have a heart problem of some sort. The other one had a bleeding leg. More customers on the way, I’m sure.”

Clay nodded. “There was a television set blaring down the hall a little while ago. I thought I heard some news guy talking about another shooting at the Deer Hollow Inn. I said to myself, that can’t be right. Can it?”

I nodded. “Afraid so.” I told Clay about Ritzo and the missing woman.

While he listened, beads of sweat were popping out of Clay's forehead. A drop slid down the side of his face. He grunted. "That place is turning into a war zone."

"Sure seems like it."

There was a box of tissues on the bed beside Clay's free hand. I pulled out a couple and blotted his forehead. He nodded a thanks.

"Did the doc say how long you're going to be in here?" I asked.

Clay shifted his arm and winced. "Chest still hurts a bit, but he said I might be able to go home in a couple days. He says the wound is healing real good. All I have to do now is shake this fever. Lord willing, I could be back to work next week. You and Franky be all right till then?"

I grinned. "If we need any help we can always ask Commission Chairman Klink to round up some of his shooting buddies."

"Yeah, right," Clay said. "Klink's vigilantes. That guy is full of crazy ideas."

When Clay and I had been inundated with shootings the week before, Commission Chairman Gilbert Klink, theoretically my boss, was convinced that Clay and I couldn't possibly solve the murders ourselves. He thought that mainly because I had won the recent election even though I'd never been a sheriff before.

Klink hadn't been a sheriff before either, but his family had been running Klinkton County for close to a hundred years. So he and a lot of powerbrokers thought he'd be a shoe-

in for the sheriff job when Sheriff Jackman retired. Needless to say, Klink was still mad as hell about losing the election to me.

Clay and I were both quiet for a moment and then he said, “How’s Marlee doing?”

“I was planning to stop by the ICU on my way out.” I looked at my watch. “Better do that now. Franky’s been alone all morning. She’s probably ready for a break.”

“Well, if Marlee’s awake, tell her Trina and I have the whole church praying for her.”

I nodded. “We’ll plan on you coming back next week—if the doc agrees. So get rid of that fever.”

“Right, Boss,” Clay said with a grin. His salute was half-hearted but well-intentioned. When I glanced back from the doorway, Clay’s head was back on the pillow and his eyes were already closed. His face looked flushed and slick.

Chapter 5

The ICU was in another wing of Mercy Hospital. When I got there, the nurse handed me a gown and mask. As I slipped them on she warned, “No more than five minutes. She needs her rest.”

Walking down the empty hall, last week’s crash scene exploded again in my mind. I could see everything. The ivory Honda’s crumpled front bumper. The shattered windshield. The shards of glass. And Marlee’s thick brown hair, matted with blood.

I could also see Clay, gun drawn, scabbling his way up the shale-littered hillside that bordered the road. And the ambulance, racing away, back toward Glen Haven, lights flashing, siren screaming. Most of all, I could still feel the horror in the pit of my stomach when I saw Marlee slumped over the steering wheel. Her face and neck, covered with blood.

The wall I’d erected between me and the world for so many years had finally started to show some cracks when Marlee entered my life. And now this.

I shoved the painful images aside as I paused outside the ICU. I had visited Marlee a number of times since the crash a couple days ago, but pushing those wide double doors open still filled me with dread.

Pings, hisses, hoses, beeps and tiny screens with squiggly lines; they were all necessary. I knew that. Medical gadgets and machines can keep people alive. They can also bring others back from the brink. I knew that, too. But to me,

the sounds and sights of an ICU were still cold, mechanical, and ominous.

There had been a red-bearded guy trussed up in the fourth bed when they brought Marlee in. His bed was empty now so Marlee's bed was the only one in the ICU that was still occupied.

I wondered. Had the bearded man simply been transferred to a regular semi-private room? Or had his body been wheeled down to the hospital morgue?

Before I sat down in the chair beside Marlee's bed one of the wide double doors swung open again. Coming toward me was the same skinny kid in green scrubs who had operated on Marlee. He nodded and stuck out his hand. His skin was still cold; his handshake still limp.

"Sheriff Eichenlaub," he said curtly.

"Dr. Koots," I replied. "How is she doing?"

He pulled a chart from a clear plastic pocket that hung from the foot of the bed and scanned it quickly. "Vitals and chemistry all within range. We're keeping her sedated, of course. Our primary goal is to keep her brain from swelling."

"What happens if you can't?" I asked.

Koots shrugged his narrow bony shoulders. "If the swelling exceeds expected limits we'll remove part of her skull. Temporarily, of course. But that may not be necessary."

"I certainly hope it isn't."

"Yes," Koots said. His voice was as bland as his expression. "Do we have your number?"

"I have several. The nurses' station has them all."

“Right,” he said, sliding Marlee’s chart back into its pocket. “You told me that when they brought her in. We’ll be in touch if any changes occur.” After another cold limp handshake he was gone again.

The ICU nurses all agreed that Dr. Koots was an excellent neurosurgeon and little old Glen Haven’s Mercy Hospital was lucky to have him on the staff. In fact, he was the first full-time neurosurgeon Mercy ever had. Before he arrived, all serious head and spinal trauma cases were sent to the hospital in Williamsport twenty-five miles away. More than a few of Mercy’s head trauma patients didn’t survive the trip.

I pulled the straight-backed metal chair as close to the bed as I could and sat down. The lump in my throat was back.

Marlee’s head was still wrapped in thick bandages. Only the eyes, nose, mouth and one cheek were showing. The skin of the cheek was paper white. Her left eye still appeared to be swollen, but not as much as before. The swelling in her nose had also gone down a bit, but it was still black and blue with a trace of green.

The hoses were still in place. One in her nose, one in her mouth. Her lips looked cracked and dry.

Once again I found her left hand and lifted it gently, careful not to disturb the green hoses that were connected to the back of her forearm. As I held her hand in both of mine it felt as cold as Koots’ hand.

“Marlee?” I said softly. “It’s Jesse.”

I lightly squeezed her fingers again but there was no reaction, no indication at all that she heard me. The lump in my throat grew thicker.

The words came out husky and strained.

“Don’t die on me, Marlee. Please.”