

Part One

The essence of falconry is not what happens to the quarry but what happens to the falconer.

Kenneth Filkins, Kahn of the Sky

The Morning After

HIS NAME was Dave Farkus, and he'd recently taken up fly-fishing as a way to meet girls. So far, it hadn't worked out very well.

It was late October, one of those wild fall days containing a fifty-five degree swing from dawn to dusk, and Farkus stood mid-thigh in waders in the Twelve Sleep River that coursed through the Town of Saddlestring, Wyoming. River cottonwoods were so drunk with color the leaves hurt his eyes.

Farkus was short and wiry with mutton-chop sideburns and a slack expression on his face. He'd parked his pickup under the bridge and waded out into the river at mid-morning just as a late fall Trico hatch created clouds of insects that billowed like terrestrial clouds along the surface of the water. A few trout were rising for them, slurping them down, but he hadn't yet hooked one yet. Trico flies were not only tiny and hard to tie on his line, they were difficult to see on the water.

He was at wits end since he'd relocated to the Twelve Sleep Valley from Southern Wyoming.

He landed in Saddlestring with no job and he didn't intend to look for one except the damned natural gas pipeline company was challenging his disability payments, claiming he'd never really been injured. And his ex-wife, Ardith, had contacted a lawyer about several missed alimony payments and was threatening to take him back to court.

FARKUS WAS intently aware of each car that sizzled by on the bridge over his shoulder. When he heard a car slow down to look at him, he made a long useless cast that, he hoped, looked practiced and elegant like Brad Pitt's double in the movie *A River Runs Through It*. He wondered how long it would be before a pretty doe-eyed twenty-something tourist would come down to the river and ask for a lesson. But he was starting to believe it would never happen.

He tied on a new fly – something puffy and white he could see on the water – and felt the power of the current push against his legs.

That's when he heard, upriver, the distinctive hollow *pock* sound of a drift boat striking a rock.

He barely looked up, so intent was he tying the nearly invisible thin tippet through the loop of his fly. Drift

boats filled with fishermen were common on the river. There were several commercial guide operations in town, and it seemed like every other home in Saddlestring had a drift boat on a trailer parked in front of it. The river was shallow because it was late fall and water was at a premium and it wasn't unusual for guides to miscalculate and hit a rock.

But when he hear a series of mishaps: *pock-pock-pock*, rock-rock-rock, he glanced up from his knot.

The white fiberglass drift boat was coming right at him, sidewise, bumping along the river rocks in a shallow current. No one was at the oars. In fact, no one seemed to be in the boat at all.

Farkus squinted and cursed. If the boat continued on its path it would hit him, maybe knock him right off his feet. Farkus couldn't swim and if his waders filled with water and he was sucked into that deep pool under the bridge..

He uneasily shuffled a few steps back. The river rocks were slick and the current pushed steadily at his legs. The boat kept coming and seemed to pick up speed. He looked around at the bank, then at the bridge, hoping someone would be there to help. But no one was there.

At the last second, before the boat hit him from the side, Farkus cursed and managed to turn toward it and brace himself with both feet. His fly-rod dropped into the water at his side as he reached out with both hands – “*Goddamit!*” he cried out -- to grasp the gunwales of the oncoming boat and stop its momentum.

The boat thumped heavily against his palms and he felt the soles of his boots slip and he was pushed a few feet backwards. Somehow, though, his right boot wedged between two heavy rocks and stopped fast. So did the boat, although he could feel the pressure of it building, wanting to knock him down. He was sick about his lost fly rod, and thought that if nothing else he could wrestle the boat to shore and sell it for three or four grand because he sure as hell wasn't going to return it to the idiot who let it get away from him in the first place.

As he stood there in the river, straining against the pressure, he realized it was harder work than it should have been. There was real weight inside the boat, but he was at an angle, bent forward with his head down and his arms straining and outstretched, so he couldn't rise up and look inside without losing his balance and his footing.

Over the next ten minutes, muscles trembling, he worked the boat downstream and closer to the bank.

Finally, he stepped into a back eddy of calmer water with a sandy bottom and pulled the boat into it as well. Sweat coursed down his neck and his thigh muscles twitched with pain.

Then he looked over the gunwale into the bottom of the boat and said, "Jesus Christ!"

He'd never seen so much blood.

One

The Evening Before

NATE ROMANOWSKI approached the stand of willows from the north with a grim set to his face and a falcon on his fist. Something was going to die.

It was an hour until dusk in the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains, near the North Fork of the Twelve Sleep River. Storm clouds that had scudded across the big sky all day now bunched to the southeast as if they'd been herded, and they squeezed out intermittent waves of snow

pellets that rattled across the dry grass and shivered the dead leaves. A slight breeze hung low to the ground and ferried both the scent of sage and the watery smell of the river through the lowland brush.

The Peregrine falcon was blinded with a leather hood topped by a stiff white bristle of pronghorn antelope hair. The bird sat stiff and upright, secured to the falconer's hand by thin leather jesses tied to its talons and looped through his gloved fingers. The falcon, Nate thought, was still and regal and hungry – tightly packed natural explosives encased by feathers just waiting for a fuse to be lit.

Although slightly less than twenty-four inches tall, the female he held, once released, was the fastest species on the planet, capable of speeds during its hunting dive of over two-hundred miles an hour. When it balled its talons and struck a bird in flight with that velocity the result was a concussive explosion of blood, bones, and feathers that still took Nate's breath away.

The falcon, like all his raptors over the years, had no name. And every time he released one to hunt there was a chance she would fly away and simply never return.

He slowed his pace and listened as he approached the wall of willows. Through the brush was a shallow, spring-

fed pond not more than three acres across. It was hard to see from the ground but was obvious from the air and it was the only substantial body of water for miles around except for the river itself. Therefore, it attracted passing waterfowl. And when the breeze shifted he could hear them: the rhythmic, almost subsonic clucking of paddling ducks. The Peregrine heard them too, and responded with an instinctive tightening of her talons on his hand.

Nate raised the bird so he could whisper directly into her hood, "They're here."

NATE WAS tall and ropey, with long limbs and icy blue eyes set in a hawk-like wind burned face. The hair he'd cut and dyed months before was growing back long and blonde, but hadn't reached its customary pony-tail length. He wore stained camo cargo pants, laced outfitter boots, a faded U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY hooded sweatshirt, and a thick canvas Carhartt vest. Strapped to his ribcage on his left side, between the sweatshirt and the vest, was a scoped five-shot .500 Wyoming Express revolver. A three-inch braid of braided jet-black human hair was attached to the thick muzzle by a leather string.

He reached across his body with his right hand and gently untied the falcon's hood and slipped it off. The

Peregrine cocked her head at him for a moment, then returned to profile. The single eye he could see was black, piercing, and soulless – the amoral eye of an killer.

Nate opened his left hand to free the jesses, and raised her up. Her wings unfurled and stretched out for a moment, then her talons bunched and pushed off his glove. He turned his face away as he was pummeled with thumping blasts of air from her beating wings and brushes of her wingtips. The first moment of flight was ungainly; she dropped slightly and thrashed to the left, the jesses swinging through the air, her feet long and extended, until she found invisible purchase and began to rise. She cleared the tops of the willows ahead by inches.

The falcon climbed in circles that were tight at first and then larger as it rose above the treetops and found a current. Then, as if she'd burned through the first stage of a booster rocket, she catapulted into the sky.

THE PAST month had been spent in a state of training and trepidation, ever since his longtime colleague Large Merle had shown up gutted at his front door. Nate had transported all seven feet and four-hundred fifty pounds of Merle toward the Town of Saddlestring in his Jeep, with his

friend gasping for breath through chattering teeth. The last thing Large Merle had said before he collapsed was: *"The Five. They've deployed."*

Nate knew exactly what that meant. The showdown he'd been anticipating for years was at hand and Merle was the latest victim. Large Merle died with a moaning death rattle five miles out of town and Nate flipped a U-turn and returned to his stone house on the banks of the North Fork. He'd said a few private words over the body and had it shipped via freightliner to Merle's only living relative, a sister in North Dakota. Then he began to prepare for visitors.

THE PEREGRINE FALCON was little more than a pinprick in the sky, a tiny black speck set against roiling thunderheads. Nate watched the bird circle in the ellipse of a lazy thermal spiral. The falcon was so high in the air it took a knowing eye to see it. But the ducks knew the falcon was there because none had attempted to fly.

Nate nodded to himself and tugged on the end of an empty burlap sack he'd tucked through his belt. He flipped the sack over his shoulder to keep it out of the way, and approached the willows in silence.

Before he entered the brush he paused and looked over his shoulder and scanned the terrain. His small house was far below in the river valley, his Jeep parked next to it. The old structure was bordered by massive old river cottonwood trees with gnarled gray bark and skeletal limbs. Because most of the leaves were gone he could see his clapboard mews for housing falcons, and an upturned flat-bottomed boat on the bank of the river he used for crossing. On the east side of the North Fork a steep red wall rose sixty feet into the air. The top was flat and dotted with scrub. Beyond the flat the country rose at a gentle pitch in a series of waves and folds until it melded into the multi-color pockets of aspen and then the dark timber fringe of the mountains. Rounded peaks above the timberline were dusted with the fresh first snow of the fall.

To the west was an undulating treeless sagebrush flat that continued for miles. A single two-track road cut through the sagebrush and meandered its way through cuts and draws to the stone house. There was no other way in, and if someone was coming he could see them miles away. On the sides of the sections of road out of his vision he'd installed motion detection sensors and hidden closed-circuit cameras that would broadcast images of visitors

into his house well before he could see them with his naked eye or through his binoculars.

From his vantage point on the plateau where the willows hid the pond, Nate noted how the river had risen. Although there had been little rain and only a few bursts of fall snow, the thirst of the river cottonwoods for water had subsided as the trees withdrew their appetite and focused inward as they prepared for winter. Without thousands of trees sucking water from the Twelve Sleep, the level of the river rose high enough to be navigable again.

All was quiet and still in every direction.

Nate turned back around reached out and parted the stiff willow branches and stepped inside.

AS THE brush closed around him he could no longer see the Peregrine, but he knew it was there by the nervous tittering of the ducks ahead. The ducks weren't alarmed because of his presence or the noise he was making as he pushed through the willows, but because of the falcon in the sky.

He sensed an opening through the branches a moment before he was knee deep in stagnant water. The bottom of the pond was silty beneath his boots but solid underneath, and with a few more steps he was waist-deep in the pond as

mallard and teal ducks scattered in his path, motoring across the surface of the water and sending the alarm to the entire population of twenty or twenty-five ducks. The silt he'd disturbed underfoot plumed through the dark pond water and turned it the color of chocolate milk near his legs.

But not one of the ducks took flight. Nate smiled to himself as he beheld one of nature's brilliant secrets.

For ducks, geese, and other waterfowl, the very silhouette of a Peregrine falcon in the sky – even if they'd never encountered one before – was deeply imprinted into their collective psyche. They knew somehow the predator thousands of feet in the air would kill them in an instant if they became airborne, just like they somehow knew the falcon would not hit them on the ground or on the surface of the water. So as long as the ducks didn't fly, they were safe. Their instinct was so ingrained that it superseded even his own intrusion into their world.

He waded across the pond with the burlap sack and gathered up four mallard drakes and dropped them inside as if selecting ripe zucchini. As he chose them the others swam away and bunched against the reeds, practically climbing over one another to get away. Four was enough, he thought, for two good meals and duck soup later. He'd use

the wings as lures for falconry exercises and the feathers as stuffing for training dummies.

Knotting the open end of the sack, Nate waded across the pond and grabbed a fat mallard hen from the flock. As he lifted the bird her bright orange feet wind milled under her belly, as if trying to run through the air. Droplets of pond water beaded on her feathers.

He leaned back and looked up into the sky and held the duck out from his body in full view. Peregrine's had incredible eyesight and he could almost sense the falcon locking in on him and the object in his hand.

Nate drew the hen in close and said, "God bless you and thank you," something he always said to wild creatures before he took an action that would result in their death, then hurled the duck into the air where it had no option but to fly or drop back to the earth like a rock.

He called out: "For my hunting partner."

The duck came alive with a burst of energy, and started to climb. It flew horizontal and fast, skirting the top of the brush in a mad dash toward the far river.

Hundreds of feet above, in a move made silent by its distance, the Peregrine deftly shrugged out of the thermal, tucked its wings tight against its body, balled its talons

so they resembled twin hammers, and began to drop head-first through the sky.

Nate could hear it coming as it shot earthward like a missile. The sound was a kind of high-pitched whistle that increased in volume as it built up velocity.

He glanced over toward the retreating duck. The hen had cleared the willows and was aiming for the river valley, its wings beating so fast they were blurs. It didn't fly in a straight line but seemed to know its only chance was to feint and zigzag through the air.

Somehow, while dropping through the sky at incredible speed, the Peregrine homed in on the flying duck and was able to make microscopic flight adjustments in its stoop attack so that when the two objects intersected – with an audible *whap* sound and an explosion of feathers that seemed to fill the sky – Nate took a sharp intake of breath and almost fell back into the water from the sheer bloody beauty of it all.

AS HE made his way down the slope toward the river with the sack of wriggling mallards, he paused next to the Peregrine. The falcon was eating the remains of the dead duck. Flesh, guts, bones and feathers filled its gullet to the size of a billiard ball and its hooked beak was shiny

with bright red blood. The bird paused and looked up, their eyes locked, something was exchanged, then the falcon resumed eating.

Nate untied the sack and reached in and grasped a drake by its neck and pulled it out. He cinched the top to contain the others and stashed the sack of live ducks beneath a mountain ash tree and weighted it with a rock. He would have the duck for dinner. This completed the circle – hunt, kill, eat -- and always reminded him he was of the natural world and not simply striding atop it.

KNEE-DEEP in the cold water, Nate wrung the neck of the duck with a sharp swing of his arm and held it out away from him as its wings beat in death throes. A full gust of wind roared up the river, roiling the surface of the water and shaking the trees. Golden spade-shaped cottonwood leaves fell into the water like upturned palms and bobbed and floated in the current.

He pushed both thumbs through the taut belly skin of the duck and worked them under its breastbone. The blood inside was hot and the smell was metallic and pungent. With his left hand, he grasped the body of the duck and with his right he broke the entire breast away until it came free. After tossing the carcass toward the bank, he

bent and dipped the breasts into the water to clean and cool them. Spirals of dark blood snaked between his knees.

The gust of wind played out and silence returned and he thought he heard a sound. Nate looked up at his falcon to see it had stopped eating and was focusing on something upriver. He followed its gaze as the pointed snout of a drift boat emerged from around a grassy bank.

The wind had overridden the distinctive noises of an approaching boat -- the slight lapping of the current on the side of the fiberglass hull, the squeak of oars being dipped through oarlocks, the shuffle of boots on the boat deck, the scrape of a shallow river rock against the flat bottom.

He was caught, he thought. There was no way he could turn and splash toward the shore and find cover before he was seen. Warning jolts fired through his nerves.

His vest was open and he reached up and slipped the thong loose that secured his .50 caliber weapon in its shoulder holster. Instinctively, he flexed his fingers in-and-out as stood up tall as the boat made the turn and came into full view. It was a low-profile open McKenzie-style Hyde drift boat, off-white in color, with a green and brown horizontal stripe on the side. There were three men in the boat -- one standing behind the casting platform in front,

one at the oars, and the third seated in the back. The man in back was slumped over and looked to be injured – or sleeping.

“There’s somebody,” the man standing in front said over his shoulder to his companions. Then: “Hey, mister. We’ve got a hurt man here. Can we pull over and call for some help?”

Nate didn’t answer. They certainly weren’t making any effort to sneak up on him. He made several quick determinations. First, the assassins sent for him in the past were professionals and had come from out-of-state. These men looked like locals. Second, it was hunting season therefore not unusual to see hunters about. Third, he’d been spotted and would have to deal with them one way or other.

“Hey,” the man in the front of the boat called out, standing and straining forward over the casting platform, “Did you hear me, mister? *We need help. We’ve got a hurt man here...*”

Nate could see the boat and the occupants clearly now. The big man in the bow was thick and tall with a full black beard and hair curling out from beneath an orange cap. Red hands grasped the top of the casting platform so he could lean over it. Dark eyes pierced out from beneath a flat

wide forehead. He wore a camo jacket and black jeans. The orange cap and the tip of the compound bow that jutted above the hull indicated he was a hunter, not a fisherman. Nate thought he'd seen him before and tried to place him.

Seated low in the center of the boat was a hunched younger man with a knob for a head and tiny hands that wrapped around the grips of the oars. He had a couple of fingers missing. Nate guessed the oarsman to be in his mid-twenties but there was something shrunken and repellent about him. He had a wide nose that had been smashed flat against his face, high cheekbones, and large ears that ended in points; a gargoyle of sorts.

The slumped man in the back wore a thick jacket and a slouch hat and his head was dropped forward so Nate couldn't see his face.

"Man, you're a sight for sore eyes," the dark man in the front said to Nate, knowing his voice would carry through the quiet valley as if he were standing next to him, "We've been looking for someone – anyone -- for while now. We haven't even seen a house anywhere."

"There aren't any," Nate said.

"No shit," the gargoyle spat, spinning the boat so the front of it faced the other bank. He began to pull the oars to propel the drift boat toward Nate.

Nate assumed the three men had put their boat in at a public access six miles upriver and had planned to float to another access closer to town. The route was used often in the summer fishing months but rarely in the fall or winter when the level of the river dropped and the locals turned their attention from fishing to hunting. All of the river miles between the put-in and Nate's stone house were through private ranch land owned by an out-of-state mogul. The mogul's house was miles away from the river tucked in a valley and it wasn't likely he would have been home anyway even if the men in the boat had gone there. Wyoming law allowed the public to float any river but it was considered trespassing if the boaters got out or even anchored. The landowners were notorious for prosecuting anyone who pulled ashore, even if the reason was an emergency, so most fishermen chose to float much further downriver toward Saddlestring, where there was more public land and the fishing was better.

"Do you have a phone we can use?" the man in front asked.

Nate had a satellite phone but ignored the question. He asked, "What's the problem, anyway?"

"Old Paul," the dark man said, pointing at the slumping man, "He's got a bad heart and some kind of nerve

condition. He just seized up about an hour ago and started jerking. Shit, he was even foaming at the mouth. He needs to see a doctor fast."

"He's my dad," the gargoyle said with a nasal twang, "And I ain't gonna lose him."

Nate noted that Paul still hadn't moved, and even the shift in the boat hadn't caused him to lift his head.

As the gargoyle pulled back on the oars and moved the drift boat across the current toward Nate, the dark man in front said, "We seen a few deer but nothing to get excited about. Them damn things just stand in the river while we float right past 'em. We coulda' killed a half-dozen of them if we'd wanted to." He laughed, "God, they're stupid."

"No," Nate said, taking a long second look at the big man and seeing a dangerous idiot, "That's just the way they are."

Like ducks that wouldn't fly when a Peregrine was above, big-game animals – even during hunting season – didn't perceive that a threat could come from the water. Nate had harvested deer on the banks or in the river from his own boat. He'd also encountered elk, bears, and moose on the river who watched him float silently by with a mixture of curiosity and familiarity.

"Are you the only one hunting?" Nate asked the dark man as the boat drew closer. The gargoyle and his father weren't wearing blaze orange and Nate couldn't see additional compound bows or hunting rifles in the craft.

"Yeah," the dark man said. "Stumpy'n Paul wanted to come along to see a master at work."

"Shit," the gargoyle said in response, shaking his head and making a face.

"I know you," Nate said to the dark man, recalling the circumstances.

"I don't think so," the dark man smiled. But his eyes showed sudden caution.

"You're known as the Mad Archer," Nate said. "My friend Joe Pickett put you in jail a few years back for shooting wildlife with your bow and leaving the meat."

The time he'd encountered the Mad Archer, Nate was with the game warden Joe Pickett in northeastern Wyoming. Joe had handcuffed the man to the bumper of his own truck and called another game warden to come out and pick him up. The Mad Archer, Joe had said, was both evil and bloodthirsty. He was suspected of using his arrows to kill dogs and cats as well, and had wounded the dog Joe rescued, a Labrador/Corgi mix named Tube. Nate had heard Joe use the Mad Archer's real name but he couldn't remember it.

The man flushed. "That might have been," he said, "but it was before I went straight. I play by the rules now, man," he said, gesturing toward his orange hat. He patted his back pocket. "I even got my license with me if you want to see it."

"Show it to Joe," Nate said as the bow of the boat came within reach. The gargoyle expected Nate to grasp the bow and pull the boat to the bank. Instead, Nate shoved it away and the boat swung back into the current. A redheaded duck had swum out of the reeds with ten little ducklings in tow in a straight line behind her, and she angled to her right to avoid the floating boat.

"Keep moving," Nate said to them.

"Hey, what about my dad?" the gargoyle asked, his face contorted. He did several front-strokes on the oars to pull the boat back into the calm eddy. "You're fuckin' heartless."

"I'll call the clinic and have them send an ambulance to the take-out," Nate said, stepping backwards toward the bank, keeping the men and the boat in front of him. "They should be waiting when you get there. You're not saving any time bringing him onshore now and calling them, anyhow. It would take them longer to get here than it will for you to float to the take-out."

Nate didn't want the Mad Archer anywhere near his house. If the man was as unstable as Joe claimed, his friends Paul and Stumpy were suspect as well. Men who hunted together shared certain characteristics and values, and this was guilt by association with the Mad Archer. Nate had never been troubled making judgments of this kind.

Plus, he'd been seen and the men would talk. Which meant the minute they were gone he'd have to clear out.

The Mad Archer glared, his fists clenched at his side. As Nate neared the shore, his boot slipped off a river rock and he had to wheel and crow-hop to keep standing.

Then before Nate could look back over his shoulder at the boat and the three men to confirm they were floating downriver, he heard a single whispered word: "Now."

Nate spun around in the river and reached across his chest for his weapon. The soles of his boots again slipped on the moss-covered rocks and he stumbled to his left but not far enough. An arrow tipped with a razor-broad head sliced through the air and hit him between his left shoulder and clavicle.

The figures in the boat who had been still just a moment before were now a blur of motion. The gargoyle was sliding a pump shotgun out of a saddle scabbard that had been hidden beneath his boat seat. The old man Paul was

awake and standing and his long coat was open and he was swinging the muzzle of a military-style carbine toward Nate.

The Mad Archer cursed because his shot had been misplaced due to Nate's stumble, and he was frantically fitting a second arrow into the nock of his bow before drawing the bowstring back again. Because both the old man and the Mad Archer were now standing, the boat pitched slightly from side to side.

Although his left shoulder screamed with pain, Nate pulled his big revolver out from its holster and cocked the hammer and leveled it with a single motion and fired.

The first bullet hit the Mad Archer in the right center of his wide forehead and blew his orange hat straight up into the air. His body collapsed forward across the casting platform.

Nate cocked the revolver on the down stroke from its tremendous kick and swung it left and shot the old man through the heart. Old Paul stiffened and sat straight back onto his swivel seat. His rifle fell into the water. Blood, bits of bone, and tissue pattered across the surface of the water behind him. He slumped forward into the same posture he'd assumed before.

Stumpy the Gargoyle nearly had his shotgun clear of the scabbard and he looked up at Nate and their eyes met for an instant before he was hit under the right armpit with such great impact that it threw his body to the other side of the boat. The bullet exited clean and smacked the surface of the water a few inches from the other bank, nearly taking out the mother duck.

NATE STAGGERED onto the gravel bank. His ears rung from the three explosions and the hum blocked out any natural sound. The entire left side of his body felt as if he were hooked up to pulsing electric cables. He holstered his weapon and touched the feathered end of the arrow that was buried into his body. He looked over his left shoulder and could see the bloody tip of the razor broad head poking out. The arrow was stuck fast but as far as he could tell it hadn't pierced a major artery or broken bone. All that was destroyed was shoulder muscle.

Out on the river the drift boat turned slowly from left to right and rocked slightly from fallen crashes of the three dead bodies that were crumpled within it. The still air smelled of acrid gunpowder and the metallic smell of pooling blood.

The mother duck and her ducklings continued downriver in an undulating line, speeding up to get as far away as they could from the disturbance.

On trembling legs, Nate approached one of the thick old cottonwoods that hugged the bank of the river. As he neared it he turned so he faced the water and his back was to the trunk. Slowly, he stepped backwards until he felt a jolt of pain as the tip of the broad head bit into the soft gray bark. Reaching up, he grasped the aluminum shaft with both hands to steady it and leaned back with all his weight, burying the arrow as far as he could into the wood and pinning himself to the tree.

Standing as still as he possible, Nate stripped the fletching off the back end of the arrow until it was smooth. Then he took a breath, gritted his teeth, and walked forward, letting the arrow slide through his shoulder.

When it was clear he glanced over his shoulder at the bloody shaft that remained imbedded in the tree trunk. Hot blood coursed down his skin in both front and back and his shirt was stained dark with it.

As he lurched toward his home for his medical kit, he noted that the boat had drifted away a few hundred yards downriver and was spinning slowly in the current.

He cursed himself. Like the deer and elk in the valley, he hadn't anticipated the threat to come from the water. Or from locals.