

Crude, Unrefined

Prologue

“Ya gotta write the fricken note,” she says to him. “Ya can’t do your suicide without it.”

“Helen was goin’ to write the note.” He puts the pen down. “But the Lord’s taken her now and I... I don’t know...” He dabs at his eyes with a tissue.

“Don’t overthink this, Frank. Just do it.”

“But I don’t know her words. What would she want me to write?”

“I don’t care.” She turns and points to his wife’s limp body slouching in her wheelchair, with her mouth agape and her eyes closed. “And right now she’s not about to tell you, is she?”

“No, but—”

“You want to be with her now, right? That’s a sweet thought. Just write that.”

“Promise you’ll take good care of Ruby?”

She stands up and slaps her hand hard on the table next to him. He starts and then drops his pen. It skitters across the table.

“Sorry for that.” She retrieves the pen for him. “But I’m on a tight schedule here. I need you to focus on the note. Don’t worry about your dog. I’ll take care of her.”

Chapter 2

**Wednesday, August 22, 2013
Bottineau County, ND – 2:15 p.m.**

Twenty-five or so miles northwest of Leon's farm, as the crow flies, another rooster-tail twirls up from another car. It's a probe sent out by the very machine provoking Leon's concern. The machine's advance man is way out of his element. Back in New York, he might impress his friends, and especially his enemies, by leaping over tall buildings in a single bound, or bending steel in his bare hands. But out here on the endless North Dakota prairie, John David Crowe, J.D. for short, sees no buildings to leap over, no steel to bend, and no people to impress. He is alone, hot, irritated, and tense. He senses his power sap, his advantage shrivel, and his fun-quotient evaporate.

He's lost any sense of motion, even though he's eased the speedometer on the Escalade over eighty. He senses nothing zipping past his window, no weeds waving at him, and nothing putting ripples on the surface of the ocean of dead wheat. No dust devils are twirling, no blackbirds are flitting, and no puffy clouds are floating in the pale blue sky. Nothing is moving between his dashboard and the hazy horizon. And the dark-gray scar of County Road 46 vanishing to a dim point on that horizon—that's not moving either. *Nothing in this damn landscape is moving*, he thinks.

But it doesn't stay the same either. Though unmoving, flat, and monotonous, the prairie's most arresting feature is its serendipity. The fields are irregular, crops are intermixed, circular hay bales are strewn about randomly as if they'd been dropped from an airplane, and no fence lines separate one field or farm from the next. Trees, single and in groups, are plopped like big weeds here and there and, periodically, swamp water fills a shallow hollow in the middle of a planted field. John David sees no evidence of any obvious attention to prairie design out there, either by the Creator or the farmer. He sees no houses, barns, or even tractors that might suggest that humans have a place in this strange landscape.

The high-pitched whining from the Escalade's AC fan ruins his concentration and mesmerizes him. He misses seeing a couple hundred feet of the gravel road. Maybe it was a mile. *How could he tell?* He slaps the side of his face with his open left hand to start the blood reflowing. A headache starts pounding. He slows and stops in the dead center of the damned road and calls his boss in New York for a bit of encouragement, or maybe sympathy.

Francelli laughs at him. "Oh, for Christ's sake, Crowe. What ya want me to do? Hold your goddamn hand? Bring ya a lemonade? You focus on your task. Let me focus on mine."

He should have pushed Francelli. "I'll get you for this, Enrico. You owe me, big time." Crowe pounds the steering wheel and wishes he'd actually summoned the courage to blast his boss for causing him such discomfort. Enrico Francelli, the 'F' in the hedge fund firm of HF&G LLC, and his partners, buy and sell businesses all over the planet every day. They do this to make money. That might seem obvious, as any business should make money. But for Francelli, making money *is* his business. Often he isn't aware of the product a company manufactures, or the location of its real estate, or the dedication of its employees... if indeed there are employees. It's the computers and the numbers. They tell him which companies to buy and which to sell. Francelli only does what his machines tell him to do: sell this, buy that, squeeze the cash out, halve the labor pool, extinguish the inventory, and then quietly slip the now eviscerated

business onto the market. Advertise it as an efficient machine and then sell it to another faceless investor.

Were his machines' directives righteous or moral? Who knows? Who cares? What's important to Francelli is the money... and only the money. Francelli then, quasi-legally, maneuvers the bushels of money he makes on the transactions into his own one-room private bank in the Caymans, or somewhere else hidden in the clouds. Francelli's desk physically stays in New York, but his business hovers in the clouds. It operates in the vapor-sphere, an ethereal entity, untouched by human hands, and unreachable by regulators.

In this case, Crowe's job is to fix a glitch in the process... a pothole encountered on the way to the money. It's not an uncommon problem. A gear in one of Francelli's machines, a firm named Prometheus Inc., became jammed. Therefore, he sends J.D. Crowe to North Dakota to bludgeon the idiots responsible, repair the damage, and restart Prometheus' engine. The problem surfaced during a review in anticipation of submitting the package to NDOEP, the North Dakota Office of Environmental Protection.

A certain document, needed to substantiate Prometheus' right to use the land, had become compromised. The ownership of that land had been assumed since the start of the project, so no one paid attention, and the problem went undetected. But now, as Prometheus prepared the documents for submittal, they found a key piece of information missing, or at least so legally ambiguous it ceased to be factual. The OTPA, Option to Purchase Agreement, for one of the three parcels required for the project could not be substantiated. And, to further complicate things, the supposed owner of record for that property could not be substantiated either. The Houston subcontractor pushed the problem up to Prometheus, and they pushed the problem up to Herbold, Francelli & Gheary. HF&G then sent Crowe, armed with his bludgeon, to meet with Robinson from Prometheus, Shultz from the Houston PR Group, and Timmins, a local attorney representing the property's supposed owner. NDOEP is hosting the meeting at their office in Bismarck. Crowe's charge is to bludgeon these fools until the glitch vanishes, then push the button and restart Francelli's machine.

According to the submittal, an entity entitled Prairie Reclamation Trust Inc., PRTI, holds title to the land. PRTI acquired the properties by deed when the elderly farmers who'd previously owned them died. Two of the farmers had indeed died, and the property did legally revert to PRTI. However, the owners of the third parcel, Frank and Helen Gupchal, refused to die before the filing deadline, so PRTI couldn't yet own their land and therefore had no right to guarantee that land to Prometheus. To further complicate matters, Prairie Reclamation Trust Inc. seems to be a mirage firm with no apparent address, phone, or website. The only evidence the firm is real is that its alcoholic lawyer, Tommy Timmins, says it is. In the modern world of the Real Estate Trust (RET), mirage RETs are not uncommon animals; many weave over the landscape. They're hard to pin down, though most of them show tethers to some physical entity when their outer layers are peeled away. PRTI appears to be a very stealthy example of the genus.

Once the problem is understood, the easy solution suggests itself. A separate OTPA must be negotiated directly with the elderly Gupchals for their parcel, thereby bypassing PRTI's RET. That would allow the deal to proceed with or without the Gupchals' death. Implementing this solution requires someone to physically put their signatures on a proper OTPA form. And because the Gupchals have no fax or computer access, someone must drive way north to their farm to do the deed. Crowe, the crisis manager with the heaviest bludgeon in this group, assumed the responsibility of making the drive and removing the glitch. PRTI's lawyer, Timmins, most likely caused the glitch in the first place. He drank continuously, contributed little, dozed often, and was in no shape to make the trip himself. However, he did say he would call the Gupchals and alert them to expect Mr. Crowe in three hours and to prepare themselves to be bludgeoned.

The Escalade's GPS unit buzzes, flashes, and then orally warns Crowe of a right-hand turn one mile ahead. He squints, looking for

some sign of an intersection, yet sees nothing but endless intertwined fields of wheat, soybeans, alfalfa, and corn. The dusty haze obscures both shape and distance, and Crowe's tired eyes play a trick on him. Several closely bunched buffalo appear in the field to the right. He rubs his eyes, refocuses, then realizes the forms are distant farm buildings surrounded by windbreak trees. He wills that image to be the Gupchal farm. Soon his GPS speaks to him again, and the driveway it promises appears out of the patchwork mass of fields on the right, accompanied by an irreverent line of thin, creosoted power poles. The corner is marked by a standard aluminum mailbox teetering atop a wood post and leaning a few inches east in respect to the prevailing wind. Fading, black, stick-on letters spell only part of the name—G PC AL—but that's enough. An address number, a red flag on a movable arm, and a silver-colored, official-looking medallion argue for attention, but without much order, on the side of the box.

Crowe hardly notices any of this. His eyes focus on the commanding presence of a blackbird that is standing atop that mailbox like a centurion. It's a shiny, black, mean-spirited, menacing-looking creature, and its eyes follow him as he makes the turn onto the Gupchals' drive. As the mailbox recedes in his passenger side mirror, he notices the centurion has left its post. He has a thought—*perhaps it's flying ahead to alert Gupchal of my impending arrival*. He's seen that happen in a video game.

That blackbird may not have the duty of overseeing J.D.'s arrival at the Gupchal farm, but other eyes do. They watch the Escalade make that turn and start the long approach to the house. She'd not wanted to place herself so close to the action, but she needs to be sure things happen just like they are supposed to. She views Crowe's progress through the high-powered scope mounted on the CheyTac Intervention .408 LRRS rifle. Her friend Travis allows her to use it. She's been preparing the scene and waiting ever since Timmins, the drunk, called her with Crowe's ETA. She's had plenty of time to

sanitize the place... scrub it down. All she has to do now is make sure Crowe gets the proper message and does his job. And here he comes now. He's right on schedule.

The thermometer on his dash display clicks up a notch to 105 degrees. Crowe slows and enters the yard cautiously, aware of his intrusion into this strange still-life. The place reminds him of an Andrew Wyeth painting—trees, grasses, people cemented to the ground and forbidden by the artist to move. He parks at the front of the house near a set of weather-beaten, wooden steps that access the generous porch. No one comes outside to welcome him. A sane man would surely be indoors cuddling next to his air conditioner. That thought gives J.D. some comfort. Perhaps it means Gupchal is a sane man, and thus willing to help him. He wants out of the heat, and wonders if—he desperately hopes that—Gupchal has air-conditioned the old house. But when he steps out of his Escalade the absolute quiet assaults him. He does not hear the telltale whine of an AC condensing unit. “Damn!” he mutters. “I really don’t need this.” He breathes in a burnt smell from the sun-roasted stubble in the adjacent hayfield. It hangs in the muggy air like the odor of overworked brakes on a semi.

She can't quench the brief shiver as her body reacts to the sight of J.D. Crowe exiting the black car, wiping his sleeve across his forehead, and foolishly looking around as if checking to see if he is alone. One would think by now he should know that he will never be allowed to be alone. She's thankful for the muggy heat. It will dull Crowe's senses and keep his subconscious from reminding him of the real dangers that might be lurking... of even suggesting to him that a high-powered rifle is aimed at a spot halfway between his baby-blue eyeballs.

“Welcome to the play, Crowe,” she says. “Too bad you missed the prologue.” She's spent the last few hours arranging the stage set

and preparing the other actors. She whispers, "Get ready, J.D. Here it comes. Lights! Camera! Action!"

He feels the heavy stillness, even more oppressive than the heat, drags himself up the steps to the front door, and forcefully jams the yellowed bell-button. J.D. hears the traditional *ding-dong* of the doorbell followed by the frantic yelping of a dog from deep inside the house. After a second try fails to summon Gupchal, he peeks in the windows that give onto the porch to the left of the door. He sees only black glass and, in it, the reflection of his own distorted face.

He looks behind him into the yard. No chickens. No cat. Not even a squirrel or a blackbird moving in the spruce windbreak. Frustrated, he turns back and smashes his fist against the wood of the door. "Damn you, Gupchal. Open this door." He can't just abandon the place and go home. Enrico sent him out here to complete the option, and he knows Enrico *must* be satisfied.

Anger quickly overtakes bewilderment. If this jerk's chickened out and blown off the interview, especially after he's spent three hours driving up from Bismarck, somebody will pay dearly for his displeasure. His throat tightens and he tries the knob. It turns. He hesitates. For the first time he considers the possibilities for misfortune within. Nevertheless, he slowly opens the door. Other than the muffled yapping of the dog, he hears nothing. Crowe carefully sticks his head into the opening.

He steps across the threshold. The wet heat inside almost overpowers him.

She switches off the red laser, puts down the rifle, and picks up her iPhone. She will follow him around the house using the several mini-audio recorders she's installed. The jerk will not be expecting to be watched. He doesn't realize what game he's playing. His mind, dulled by heat and the strangeness of the situation, will not

be thinking creative thoughts. And, she remembers, he was always fairly numb... even at full alert. She smiles. He is unsuspecting of how close he is to being just another dead man on a lonesome North Dakota farm.

“Damn it Gupchal, where the hell are you?” Crowe instinctively looks at his watch, but the moist air inside the house fogs his sunglasses and he cannot read the dial. He wipes them off on a Kleenex and confirms that it’s almost two-thirty. He makes it a point to be punctual. Billions of dollars could sometimes—especially with the Chinese—depend on one being seated in his chair when the client’s clock strikes the appointed hour.

John David advances into the front room. The lonesome sound of his own shoes pounding on the pine boards resounds in his ears and energizes the dog. Its barking turns manic and is now accompanied by frantic scraping and pounding on the closed door in front of him. Crowe notes the deadbolt. It’s been set! Someone deliberately locked that fiend in the basement. The thought terrifies him, trips a switch somewhere near his stomach, and starts things to churning. He’s not a dog person. The thing sounds like a Rottweiler on steroids. Someone with more guts than he has will have to open that door. And his instinct tells him the Gupchals can’t possibly be locked down there with that crazed dog, at least not if they’re still alive.

He glances around and takes a quick survey of the place. It resembles a movie set from the 1950s. The furniture is ancient and well used but scrubbed clean and placed exactly as the director ordered. He sees the dining room table with a beige, lace tablecloth and a vase of semi-withered flowers, a coffee maker, and a toaster set on a Formica countertop whose surface has been scrubbed down through the flower pattern. It reminds Crowe of the set the Coen brothers built for *Fargo*. That movie had made an impression. Before today, it’s been the only exposure he’s had to even the *concept* of North Dakota.

After a quick look around the first floor, he cautiously ascends the stairs and confirms the lack of any life on the second floor. Finding nothing, he returns to the kitchen, takes a deep breath, and concentrates on finding some finer-scale evidence. He notes a sheet of white paper placed dead center of the round kitchen table. He bends over for a look. He sees the words written in black magic marker: “Helen and I thank you God, we’re going home.”

He has no idea what the words mean, but he senses an evil spirit creeping around. He hasn’t thought about that word—evil—since maybe kindergarten, but he senses a dank vapor seeping from the page. He escapes to the heat outside and closes the door. It seems quieter outside on the porch, perhaps even cooler. He tries to think. He leans against the siding, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. The dog has quit barking, but now the silence screams at him. He yells back at the scorched fir trees, “Where the hell are you?” His words evaporate in the stifling heat, returning no response, no hint even of an echo.

She returns to the rifle scope and sees beads of sweat dot J.D.’s forehead. She imagines looking behind his forehead, into his brain. She senses his confusion and sees his anger. She smiles, and enjoys watching the sun roast his pallid skin and boil his brain fluid. “Okay, John,” she says. “It is time to do your job. I haven’t got all day. Take a look into the other buildings.”

Crowe feels he needs to smash something. He kicks a small wooden chair. He watches it skitter across the porch, bounce down the steps, and land in a dirty shrub beside the entry walk. He notes the barn across the yard and the beat-up wooden garage some twenty feet to the right of it. He has no choice. He must check the buildings just to be sure. He walks down the side steps, crosses to the barn, and tries the smaller door centered between two commercial-sized garage doors.

He pushes the door into a dark void, then feels around on the wall for the light switch and flicks it on. Though he's never been in a barn in his life, this thing looks pretty much textbook for one. It's dank and smells oily. An ancient, spiderweb-encased pickup and a green John Deere tractor sleep in the dim light and shadows. Evil-looking, menacing machines with humongous wheels, multiple sharp but rusted edges, and operator cockpits high atop them, occupy the remainder of the space. Crowe recognizes these machines. He'd once seen such monsters in an apocalypse movie, chasing one another through burning debris fields.

He turns off the light, closes the door, and crosses the yard to the wood-framed, one-car garage. He opens the side door, but it travels inward only a few inches before it jams against something. He snakes his arm through the narrow opening and feels around for a switch. The light doesn't work but the door opener does. Pushing it initiates a rhythmic clanking noise and the door begins to rise.

She watches Crowe stumble backward from the side door and stagger around to the front of the garage. She sees his starchy white face contort in pain and astonishment as the curtain rises to reveal the stage she's set for him. The front of the immaculate, white Buick stares at him, as do the strangely distorted countenances of Frank and Helen Gupchal, sitting deathly still in the front seat, absolutely unmoved by his sudden arrival.

"Not feelin' much like Superman now, huh?" she says.

She watches John David Crowe corral enough courage to creep up a bit closer, perhaps in an attempt to verify this morbid tableau as an illusion, or some macabre manifestation of the excessive heat. She'd secured them both with their seat belts, though both their heads cant to the side and both mouths hang open. There's no doubt that he sees, and probably smells, death. He's had no experience with unexpected death this close to his expensive suit before. She watches him quake with spasm, then splatter what's left of his break-

fast toward the garage door opening. Some of it even makes it as far as the shiny grille of the white Buick.

She almost laughs. “What a pussy,” she says. She thinks about putting him out of his misery. All it would take is one round slipped in right above the dark glasses. She pulls the trigger. “Bang,” she says. The rifle isn’t loaded, but the thought of the imaginary bullet slicing through his forehead makes her smile. She’s grown way past the need to physically kill him, though the thought still has merit. Crowe has work to do and she must make sure he does it properly. “I’ll save that bullet for your boss, Francelli. You go on, Crowe, you sorry piece of shit. You gotta do Francelli’s work for him.”

After a few moments, or maybe hours, of indecision—Crowe finds it difficult to get a reasonable handle on time—it occurs to him that humans are not designed to think at 105 degrees fahrenheit. He retreats to his car, fires up the AC, and waits for some cooler air to force rational thoughts into his hot head. “Christ! Dumped into this wasteland with two dead farmers in a Buick and a hyena in the basement.” He keeps jamming the button on the AC, but his efforts cannot push the number below eighty degrees. “Shit!” He thinks the fact that he feels anger now, more than physical discomfort, is a good sign. Anger will stimulate his gray matter. But he sorely needs direction. He will call Francelli and let *him* absorb some of this bizarre scene; make *him* feel some of the discomfort; have *him* confirm the right path.

She watches J.D. use his phone and reads his body language. “What a pussy,” she says again. “He’s calling Francelli to complain.”

She knows Francelli intimately, and knows exactly what Francelli will say. And Crowe, if he wasn’t so stupid, should have known it even without calling. He is, after all, the one paid to be the assassin. She puts on her Francelli voice. “Two things you do, Crowe. Fax a copy of the OTPA to Anderson at Prometheus by close of business

today, and then make sure no evidence remains that HF&G came within two hundred miles of that farm.”

That’s pretty much word for word what Enrico tells him, and with that same supercilious tone.

“Enrico, if these folks are now dead, do I even have to get an OTPA signed? Doesn’t the land transfer automatically?”

“Get that OTPA now, J.D. We need to move immediately. That title will be tied up in court forever. We need this resolved in a couple of days. Just get it done.”

“But how the hell am I...” The line goes dead. Enrico has moved on. He’s left him to stew in this pot alone with all these smelly vegetables.

“Shit!” Crowe says.

But he quickly realizes that Enrico cut through all the superfluous stuff for him and illuminated his path to the answer. He has a simple job to do and he’s brought the equipment to do it. He can’t let the 105 degrees, the howling dog, or two dead people in a white Buick deter him from doing that job. “Just two small things,” he says to himself. Everything seems clear in his head now. “I think I can do this, Enrico.”

She monitors Crowe as he does chore number one, using one of the several pieces of compact equipment in his briefcase to scan both Mr. and Mrs. Gupchals’ signatures from the insurance form she’d left on the desk where even he would easily find it. Then he transfers the signatures to the OTPA form, prints it out, and faxes it to Prometheus. She then watches Crowe meekly perform the second task and laughs as J.D. attempts to cover his tracks by erasing a few fingerprints. The fool acts like he’s never cleaned anything in his entire life. And he had really bungled the clean-up job in front of the garage.

She understands she will have to correct his mistakes after he leaves. She should send a bill to Francelli. She should probably also alert Francelli that she is aware Crowe forged that document, submitted that document to a state authority, and perhaps did not report two dead bodies in a white Buick to the sheriff. And she could advise him that Crowe's neat maneuver with the scanner solved only the short-term problem. She's fixed it so Prometheus would never be able to establish ownership of this property. And without controlling the site, the refinery review process, and indeed the whole stupid project, would, in a couple of months, smash full-speed into the wall she'd erected in its path. "This is but the beginning, my love. Only Act Number One! Sit back and enjoy it, Enrico. It's the last thing you'll enjoy for a long, long time!"

When five years ago she'd started this convoluted scheme to financially ruin Francelli, she'd assumed since Gupchal and his wife were both over ninety, they would certainly be dead by the time they needed to be off their land. But the two of them had been kept alive by an overly compassionate neighbor and a big-brother-type county service agency. Their non-dead state had put her in the position of forcing their demise so the land transfer could be completed and Francelli's refinery could be moved to the next approval level. More obstructions awaited the project at that plateau, since she'd designed the collapse as a three-act play. For maximum impact, all three acts must play out.

Helen and Frank realized their responsibility. They must be deceased before the land could transfer. They'd discussed it previously and felt their continued existence was quite meaningless with their end so near. Helen and Frank knew it was the honorable way to leave. They did not want to be stashed in a hospital hooked up to machines. The three of them agreed Helen and Frank would die on their farm. They did not want to slowly roast to death in Texas like several of their friends.

She'd helped them both prepare for the event... helped clean the house and set everything perfectly. But then, in all the excitement, Helen had suffered a stroke or heart attack or something early this

morning. When she died, Frank lost focus. He was inconsolable, moaning and crying, unable to concentrate on completing the pact. He didn't want Helen to be alone wherever she was now, but he couldn't figure out how everything would have to play out. He wanted to join his wife but didn't know how. His wife's mind was the one that worked, so she'd made all the decisions. She'd done all the planning.

And so, after Frank wrote the message at the kitchen table, she'd maneuvered the two of them into their car, strapped them in, turned the ignition, waved them goodbye, and then closed the overhead door. She recognized the potential for evil inherent in the Gupchals' deaths when juxtaposed with the metaphysical refinery project Francelli's firm was now proposing for that very land the Gupchals had just deserted. How could she not tether those two absurdities for the good of her morality play? She calls Timmins. He's the guy who'll start the process... if he ever sobers up.

After watching J.D. drive away, she makes ready to leave, but walks one more time through the rooms to make sure she's taken care of everything. Her footsteps trigger the muffled barking from the basement again. "Damn! Forgot about that dog." She finds the water and food bowls, fills them, and brings them to the basement door. She opens the door quietly and places each bowl on the top step. The dog limps halfway up the stairs, stops, glances briefly at her, then advances and starts in on the water. She shuts and locks the door. "You better stay in the basement, Dog. It's cooler down there, and I don't want you messing up my cleaning work."

She leaves by the side door and walks out behind the barn. She removes the black tarp she'd pulled over her ATV and pushes it out into the hay field. Then she goes back and erases any trace of tire tracks in the dirt around the barn. She checks the garage one more time to confirm that both the Gupchals and their Buick have finished breathing.

She walks to the ATV and takes off toward the east, following the same grassed-over farm trails she came in on. She would make no tracks in the ground, no dust plumes in the sky. Travis will be

waiting for her in his pickup. But he's ten miles away and she has a rough ride before she'll see him.

She stops the ATV briefly and texts Travis. "I'm leaving the farm. You'd better be keeping the beer cold."

Chapter 3

**Wednesday, August 22, 2013
Bismarck, ND – 10:53 p.m.**

Steffie Cobb uses the TV to push her into sleep. Sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn't. Usually it's Letterman, but during football season ESPN performs the task. With the NFL preseason underway, the Sports Center guys are doing their best to lull her into unconsciousness... but it's not working tonight.

It's her son, David. As usual, he's the problem. Or rather, he's usually the one testing her mothering skills, which she readily admits are less than awesome. He's a sophomore at Bismarck North High School and he is smart, athletic, and popular. He's an ideal son in every aspect, but he has one big problem. His younger brother Jake, now a freshman, out-performs him at everything without trying or even realizing it. The current problem concerns football. David worked very hard on the junior varsity team last year and believes he has a good chance to make varsity this season. However, younger brother Jake, the freshman, seems to have procured a starting wide-receiver slot after only two days of practice. The boys had another silent supper. Steffie has no clue how to solve this thing and her husband, snoring softly beside her, exacerbates the problem by taking great pleasure in Jake's prowess while dismissing David's

hard work. He sees Jake as the kid he never was and so is excited by his potential. He doesn't seem to see David, who is pretty much a clone of himself, at all. Even worse, he maintains that feelings, like David's jealousy, are the mother's responsibility to sort out. This is driving her bats and is preventing her from getting much needed sleep.

At seven minutes before eleven, her cell buzzes softly and skitters about on the nightstand. She leans over, grabs the thing, and tilts it to read the caller's name—Sheriff Gaffey. She doesn't want to wake Matt who, oblivious to the distractions of the lit table lamp and the yakking heads on Sports Center, fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. She leaves the bed, unplugs the phone, walks into the hall, closes the door behind her, and only then answers the call.

“Sheriff, isn't it past your bedtime?”

“It most certainly is, Steffie,” he says. “Sorry to be calling so late. I really need to talk.”

“I'm headed down to the kitchen so I don't wake Matt. What's got you rattled, John? I hear frustration in your voice.”

“I need your help. I've found a double suicide up here this evening and it's giving me fits. I'm hoping I can get you to drive up here in the morning and help me figure it out.”

“Well, Sheriff, I don't—”

“Please, Steffie. I'll consider you a consultant... pay you for time and transportation.”

“Of course I'll come up. I owe you big time. Got to pay down my debt somehow. And you won't owe me anything. My paper's paying me to find stories. I'm assuming there's a story in this for me, right?”

“That's true, certainly. But I can't figure what kind of story's hiding out there. Things don't look right for suicide. So, I thought, since Steffie's the expert on farmer suicides, maybe she should review the site before we mess the thing up too much. Maybe you can figure this out for a stupid old man... find me a clue or two.”

“Okay. I'll feed my crew here, send them off to work and football practice, hop into my Honda, drive like crazy, and, assuming no

cop pulls me over for speeding, be there in two and a half hours... say 9:45, plus or minus.”

“Thanks, Steffie. I really appreciate this. I’ll provide coffee and donuts.”

“You’re darn right you will. Now, what’s your story about?”

“A neighbor found this ancient retired couple, both of them around ninety-five, in their garage, stone dead, apparently asphyxiated in their Buick. Everything points to suicide, Steffie, even the short handwritten note. But the site’s just unnaturally tidy. That’s assuming one can think of any suicide as natural. There’s something goofy going on up here. I need your expertise, and I need it fast, and I’d like to get some sleep sometime soon. Maybe I’m just a silly old man to question the thing, but I need an expert’s opinion. Maybe you can poke around the site and talk to the neighbor... make some sense of this thing, Steffie. Ease my doubts.”

“Or maybe confirm them?”

“I just want to be able to sleep. This thing is gnawing at me. I’m thinking even the pills won’t work tonight.”

“Email me anything you can. I’ll go over it in the morning when my mind is working. That’ll get me up to speed before I barge through your door.”

Chapter 4

**Thursday, August 23, 2013
Bottineau County, ND – 9:45 a.m.**

Steffie Cobb is both a very respected reporter for the *Bismarck Plainsman* and a farm girl born in Pierce County, up near Rugby. She knows North Dakota's farmers and understands their death rituals. Last year, sensing that inordinate numbers of them were dying on an accelerated schedule, she'd written a series of articles for the *Plainsman* documenting an increase in the number of elderly farmer suicides occurring in the lonely rank of upper tier counties. Her series won an investigative journalism prize at the regional awards last May in Minneapolis. She'd documented the harsh conditions and the psychological pressures that confronted many elderly, isolated farmers as they headed into another cold, desolate, boring winter with no guarantee they'd pop out on the other side. Climatic and social pressures bombarded their psyches and exposed their fatalistic tendencies. Some folks made the reasoned choice of a quiet death on their own terms rather than fight another winter—either the brutal one promised by North Dakota or the boring loneliness of the Arizona desert, where some of the wealthier and more energetic natives fled. But, though they had escaped the cold, they unfortunately removed themselves from the comforting aspects of friends and family. Steffie used Sheriff Gaffey's

knowledge and understanding to help form her argument for the suicide series. She now believes it's her privilege and duty to repay him.

Steffie also sees the sheriff's immediate problem as an extension or continuation of her previous work. She'd undertaken that series as something of a personal cleansing mechanism, an attempt to assuage the guilt for allowing her own parents to, in effect, design their own exit strategy, and perhaps also an attempt to understand her own struggle with North Dakota boredom. Her folks had retired to Tucson. Certainly that classifies as a type of suicide. Arizona sapped their strength and, after three years, killed them just as dead as North Dakota would have. Legally, and perhaps technically, their deaths weren't suicides. But their will to live evaporated very quickly in the desert heat. They stayed inside their sun-baked room in the desert with both the TV and the AC blasting at them, and they waited patiently for dry, hot, and lonesome Tucson to act the grim reaper.

The drive up north happens without Steffie being much aware of it. All of a sudden she clears the slight rise east of town and Bottineau appears in the shallow valley. Very light traffic during the drive allows her mind to concentrate on the problem with her son, David, though with all the thoughts running through her head, not much solution filters out. She sees Jake, both physically and personality-wise, as taking after her, while David seems a physical and emotional clone of his dad. She thinks herself guilty of favoring David as the one needing to be cuddled. She never thinks Jake needs her attention. He's comfortable plowing the fields on his own, although, unless she constantly applies a strong leash, he'll surely find trouble. She has no idea how her mother, who raised eight kids, found the way to do it without killing a few of them, or going mad.

Steffie pulls into the gravel lot at the sheriff's office at 9:50. There's reasonable time for coffee and donuts.

Gaffey's been watching for her arrival and opens the outer door as she approaches. "Mornin' to ya, Steffie. This old man's certainly

happy to see you.” He gives her a hug, a very serious bit of social interaction for him. “Thanks for coming up. I wanted to call you earlier yesterday but kept putting it off. Finally, ol’ lady reason kicked in and convinced me she’d not let me sleep till I did it.”

“I owe you big time, Sheriff. I’m glad to get this chance to help. Let’s get to work.”

“Come back to the conference room. I’ve got notes and photos tacked to the wall and your coffee and donuts on the table. And there’s someone you have to meet.” He opens the door and, as she walks into the room, a golden Lab limps over to her and licks her hand.

“Say hello to Ruby, Steffie.”

She puts her briefcase on the table, sits down on a straight chair, and lets Ruby drop her head into her lap. “What a pretty girl you are, Ruby! What happened to your leg?”

“Neighbor tells me the leg’s never worked right since a run-in with a pickup several years ago.”

“Not quite the attack dog I’d expect to see hanging with the law, Sheriff. She’s a bit lame and laid back for police work, don’t ya think?”

“Ruby’s not my dog. She belonged to the suicide couple. She kind of followed me home yesterday. I couldn’t leave her up there in that empty house all by herself now, could I?”

“No, but I might be able to use her dog talents. Maybe I could take her up there with me. With both our noses poking around we’re sure to find something. Right?”

“I’ll let you two poke around by yourselves for a while. I don’t want to be a distraction, though I’ll send Deputy Turnquist up in a couple of hours. He’ll be able to fit your observations into the case as we understand it.”

Steffie had grown up on a farm just northwest of Rugby, thus she understands the symbiotic relationship between farmers and their landscape. It’s an uncomfortable alliance, as Mother Nature has seen

her natural prairie grasses replaced by invasive plants like corn and wheat. Steffie recognizes the visual evidence of this confrontation. She can see which farmers work in concert with Mother Nature, which have made her the enemy, and which have given up even taking sides.

She notices the tilting mailbox with the fading letters and the missing two vowels. She slows, turns off the county road, and then heads up the long driveway toward the farmhouse. She puts all her sensors on alert, drives slowly, observes the background, and jams as much miscellaneous information into her memory as she can. She wants to isolate the anomalies occurring in the uniform-appearing background and try to see the subtle things that might support a potential for suicide. She allows elements of the landscape to sink in.

Time moves slowly out here. It masks changes to the landscape, sometimes rendering them invisible. She tries to put herself between the actions of the Gupchals and the land's reaction to their efforts. She needs to determine the strength of the symbiotic relationship between these now dead farmers and their land. She notes the ratio of cultivated fields to resting ones, the intruding scraggly trees and brush in a drainage swale, and the short section of new fence with steel posts unprofessionally stitched into a section of ancient wooden ones.

She knows right away the Gupchals are retired and haven't worked the farm themselves for years. They must lease the fields to someone who obviously cares only about the areas leased and nothing else. The drainage channels, fence lines, farm roads, and outbuildings all need maintenance. Several pieces of equipment lie rusting where they've expired. There seems little sense of the future governing activities on this farm, which exhibits no pretense of maintaining its value. The Gupchals did not care; or, more likely, they could not marshal the energy to care for their farm any more. Steffie's reading of this farm tells her its owners might very well have been candidates for suicide.

"This place is depressing," she says to Ruby. "The more I study this damned prairie, the more lonesome I feel. I need to get myself away. Ya think it's time to move to the city?"

Ruby jumps to attention and jams her nose against the front window.

“Here we are, girl. Recognize the old homestead?”

Steffie drives across the gravel yard and parks by the side stairs. She takes the leash from the back seat and, with difficulty, attaches it to the squirming dog’s collar. “Patience, old girl! Sorry, but I can’t let you run off on me.”

When Steffie opens her driver’s side door, Ruby tries to force herself through it first, but Steffie doesn’t release her hold. Order is quickly restored.

“Nice try, Ruby! Thought you’d catch me off guard, huh? You gotta learn I’m the boss here.” She tugs lightly on the leash to emphasize the point.

Steffie may be the boss, but Ruby is guiding this investigation, and she drags Steffie up the steps to the front porch, pushes her nose into the mesh of the screen door, and growls softly.

“Good, dog! Want to search the house first? Me too! We’ll work the grounds later.”

After a struggle with the leash and the key, she finally gets the door open, and they stumble inside. Ruby’s claws slip and slide on the tile in the entry area as she strains to free herself. With a bit of difficulty, Steffie lets her go. “You poke around. I need a few minutes to adjust my sensors to this place and get a feel for how your owners lived. Go! Find me some evidence.”

Free of her tether, Ruby wanders off through the dining room and into the sun porch. She doesn’t do much sniffing and doesn’t appear interested in investigating.

Steffie finds the house just as the sheriff described. It looks cleaned to death. Maybe that’s why Ruby’s having trouble getting interested. “What’s wrong, Ruby? You can’t find anything to smell?” The whole place is scrubbed down hard, sanitized, with everything put back in place just so. Dishes are secure in the cupboards, counters clear, the floor immaculate, the wastebasket under the sink empty, and a sharpened pencil inserted into the little pouch on the notepad next to the phone. It’s the same condition in the other rooms

with everything stowed away, all the surfaces polished, no speck of dust anywhere. And, according to Ruby, no smells to smell either.

She remembers from the file that a neighbor told Gaffey that the Gupchals were planning a short trip and she wonders if this might be a normal pre-trip ritual. Perhaps suicide *was* the trip they'd been planning. This old couple apparently spent their last hours on earth ordering all their possessions as if they expected never to come back. She's thinking this might be reasonable behavior before a planned trip *or* a planned suicide. But such manic cleansing seems like overkill. She thinks, *what ninety-five-year-old couple would do that?*

She thinks that perhaps Helen, ninety-five and wheelchair bound, had someone help her with the cleaning. She looks for answers in her copy of Gaffey's interview with the neighbor, Verna Blakely. Finding none, she phones that neighbor.

"Good morning, Mrs. Blakely. My name is Steffie Cobb, and I'm over at the Gupchals' house now. I'm working with Sheriff Gaffey. He told me you knew them as well as anyone, and I have a question or two for you about the way they lived. Can you help me?"

"Certainly, Miss Cobb. They said they'd be leaving on a trip and would bring Ruby over to stay with us. But they never came by, and they didn't answer their phone. So my husband went over and he found them." Her voice disintegrates and she begins to cry.

"Sorry, Mrs. Blakely, but I have to ask you a couple of questions about her cleaning regimen. How would you rank her on the cleaning performance scale from slob to obsessive?"

"What a strange question," Verna says. "She kept the house clean enough. Average, I'd imagine. Though, with her wheelchair and all, I think Frank did a lot of her housework the last several months. He maybe vacuumed and dusted every few weeks but not so good as to move the furniture to get behind. He wasn't much of a cleaner."

Steffie senses a bit of social contempt in Verna's voice, aimed at someone less professional.

"Why do you ask?"

Steffie describes the immaculate movie-set condition, the proverbial 'putting on clean underwear to die' sort of clean.

“Well, Miss Cobb, to tell the truth, I can see many other women doing that before I’d think about Helen. Not speakin’ ill, or sayin’ she’s lazy, but a professional job’s not something she’d do. Then again, I wouldn’t think suicide’s something she’d do either. It’s all so confusing.”

“Did someone help her with housework?”

“No, not out here. We’re miles from town. But the County Extension Service visited her regularly. Ms. Cobb, that house has never looked like you’re describing. Never!”

“I appreciate your help, Mrs. Blakely. If I run across something else I don’t understand, can I call you again?”

“By all means, Miss Cobb. I’m glad to help any way I can.”

“Thank you. You’ve been a big help.”

Steffie stows her phone and walks into the sunroom. Ruby follows dutifully. They stand quietly and take everything in. Magazines are neatly stacked on the end table. An ancient computer takes up an inordinate amount of space on a desktop, with the mouse positioned exactly in the middle of the mouse pad. “I wonder what they did on the computer?” She checks to see if the thing is plugged in, then pushes the power button. Nothing happens. She checks connections and tries again. “Looks like this is dead, Ruby,” she says. “Don’t suppose you know if it works? Or why the mouse might be perfectly placed if the machine isn’t used? What’s the point?” She makes a note to ask the sheriff if he’d been able to access the memory.

A bronze holder contains loose bills and letters, and next to that, what appears to be a roll of rubber-banded mail. Chair pillows and bolster covers rest in their correct positions, the footstools directly symmetrical with their respective chairs, and the TV remote positioned dead center on top of the TV. A severely disinterested Ruby doesn’t even give the room a circuit, though her eyes do follow Steffie as she pokes about.

Steffie sees few mementos from the long life this couple must have spent here. There is no pithy saying hanging on the kitchen wall, no shelf of knickknacks, no ceramic angels on the end table, and only two small photographs on the living room mantel—an el-

derly couple in 1950s dress, probably a set of parents, and a head shot of two happy young women dressed for a party. No photos of children or grandchildren are displayed, no religious wall hangings, no crucifix, no 'God Bless This House' plaque. Might the dearth of memorabilia increase the suicide index of the household? Or, might it mean nothing?

"What's the matter here, Ruby? Even after a dozen strangers have walked all over the place, you don't feel the need to sniff?" She walks over to the large windows and looks at the still-life outside.

After a while she walks back to the desk, studies it for a bit, then picks up the rubber-banded stack of unopened mail. She finds several ads, two apparent bills, and a couple of solicitation letters, all wrapped in a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine and a small farm-service newsletter. She notes the dates stamped on the letters—a few days before the deaths occurred. *It's a very recent stack! If this mail came in before the Gupchals died, why is it still rubber-banded? If it came after, then that would have been yesterday and then who brought it in from the mailbox? Does unopened mail argue for or against suicide?* She'll have to think on this for a bit. It doesn't feel rational.

"Okay, Ruby, you make sure I check the mailbox on our way out." Steffie is bored. Normally, the questions such abject normalcy provoked would put her on alert. But that isn't working here. The site's telling her the precise presentation of the scene must be too elaborate for a suicide. On the other hand, she isn't seeing the sense of disruption associated with a typical murder. Like the sheriff said—"things seem spooky."

"Let's take a tour around the yard. Show me something I can't see... something all the humans poking around here yesterday missed." They exit the kitchen and head down the stairs. A make-shift wheelchair ramp, built over the stairs between the handrails, narrows the access so that Steffie and Ruby must descend them single file.

Steffie wants first to look at the death scene in the garage, but Ruby follows her own agenda. She sniffs around the porch at the

front of the house, picks up something interesting, and lets it lead her toward the barn. Ruby goes directly to a door, sticks her nose into the weather-stripping at the bottom edge, and then stands motionless with her nose smashed into the gravel in front of the door.

“What is it girl? What do you smell?”

Ruby apparently doesn't have an answer. She looks up at Steffie, then is off around the right side of the barn toward the garage. She sniffs at the side door and then trots around to the front where, apparently, she finds something else worth her interest in the gravel just off the concrete slab in front of the overhead door. She paws vigorously, builds up a small mound, exposes a shallow hole, sticks her nose into that hole, and then, like the birddog she is, steps back and points at the hole with her nose.

“You find something, girl?” Ruby doesn't answer, so Steffie has to get down on her knees, bend over, and sniff the hole for herself. Ruby sticks her nose in too; it is, after all, her hole. “Ruby, you gotta let me smell this.” She catches a hint of a pungent odor. Or maybe it's only Ruby she smells. Understanding that Ruby's nose has hers outclassed, she gives up trying to confirm the presence of a smell, especially since Ruby is tugging at her, the nose wanting to move on to other things. Steffie, however, has equipment other than a nose. She has a ball-point pen. She carefully pushes enough gravel stones out of the way to reveal bits of what look to her like human vomit. Small mushy lumps, maybe green pepper and sausage, are hiding in between the stones. “What have we here, Ruby? Looks like somebody's Denver omelet, huh? And it hasn't even started to decompose yet. This is recent!” She takes several photos of it, thinking it's what the sheriff would do and she calls Sheriff Gaffey.

“I am not at all sure about these deaths as suicides,” she tells him. “I'm not sure of anything except for one thing. I'm thinking this scene has all the marks of some intense female attention. Everything's so tidy, so exactly placed. I've spent an hour poking around here, and no man I'm aware of would be nearly so thorough covering up a mess. Someone who knew how to clean did

this cleaning. And most likely that someone was a woman, and some woman much more a housekeeper than Helen Gupchal ever dreamed of being, even when she wasn't in a wheelchair. What do you think?"

"I think that's interesting, Steffie. But I need something far more definitive."

"Okay, I'll give you definitive. I think your meek police dog did find something. Ruby, she's a female mind you, found us a clue. She found something sniffable in the gravel in front of the garage door and dug herself a little hole to mark the spot."

"Something sniffable? I think my forensic team needs something more precise, Steffie."

"I supervised her work, Sheriff. I got down and looked into her hole and confirmed she found something. It's rather fresh human vomit from the looks of it, in the stones just off the concrete garage slab. Should I dig some up and bring it in to you?"

"No, Steffie! Just leave it be. Deputy Turnquist should be showing up soon to check on what you're doing. He's got the proper equipment to secure a sample. You don't touch anything. We can't have the chain of evidence broken. And if you find anything else, just note it and tell Turnquist. Let him do his work. Okay?"

"Got it, Sheriff. I'll wait for your deputy. I've got several questions for him."

Ruby wanders over to the spruce tree windbreak, then along those trees to the back of the barn. She sniffs a black tarp crumpled behind a frame that once supported a propane cylinder. She grabs the tarp with her teeth and tries to dislodge it. Steffie pulls out the tarp, wondering if she'll find another body. Nothing—just an old tarp. After a few minutes both of them lose interest and head back to the front of the house. Ruby stands rigid with a look that says, "Okay, I'm finished here, now what?"

"Damn!" Steffie says. "What am I missing? I don't feel I can go home yet. I haven't found anything." She remembers Gaffey told her that sometimes life just doesn't make a lot of sense. Sometimes you just have to live with what you got.

Steffie thinks that's probably the difference between a reporter and a sheriff. She wants the pieces to line up, to tell a story. He only takes what he finds, types up the report, and calls it a day.

She's almost ready to accept the 'call it a day' path when Ruby's sudden bark alerts her to the deputy's cruiser coming up the driveway.

An hour later, after she'd watched Deputy Turnquist complete his work, she leaves the farm and heads home. A half hour after that, she realizes she's already made one big decision. She completely forgot about bringing the dog back to the sheriff. She looks over at Ruby curled up on her passenger seat and smiles. She'll have to throw an extra burger on the grill tonight.