The old rancher backheeled the heavy wooden door shut behind him, shedding tufts of snow from his pantlegs and streaking the door with mud. The warm pine- and coffee-scented air of the ranch house fogged his glasses, and he pulled them off and folded them into his shirt pocket. He pried off each boot and hung his heavy coat on a peg near the door, added his hat, and furrowed his fingers through his matted gray sheaves. Chafing his hands, he crossed the kitchen to the coffee pot on its warmer and filled a cup, cradling it a moment before tilting it to his mouth.

That you, Clark? called his wife from the next room.
Yeah, it’s me.
You sound funny, she said. Something the matter?
Nothing’s the matter, he said.

He came into the pine-paneled family room where his wife perched forward on the couch with her knees spread wide around a corner of the coffee table. She’d laid out newspapers and had nearly finished repotting a sizable areca palm, gently patting the soil around the base of the pot’s blue porcelain.

Isn’t this a nice pot, she said. They’re just in new at the store. Says on the bottom, made in Vee-et-nam. She wagged her head in disbelief, drawing out the last syllable, rhyming it with jam. Who would’ve ever thought that?

It’s real nice, Daneen, said Clark.

Only nine ninety nine for this nice big pot too. Most of those real big ones were at least fifteen, but still, that’s a bargain. Daneen shook the dirt from her fingers and wiped them on the towel she had placed.
over the bulge of her stomach. She cast an appraising glance at Clark as he slumped onto the couch beside her and let out his breath like a punctured tire. Is something wrong, hon? she asked. You look white as a ghost.

Clark rubbed his face. Those dang new boys is all, he said.

Daneen slipped a coaster beneath Clark's cup of coffee. Now what?

Went up the canyon today, said Clark, checking to see they were all right with this storm, making sure they'd rounded up them stragglers from Cold Spring Hollow like I said, and of course they hadn't.

Daneen clucked her tongue.

Said they got chased out.

Chased?

Clark rose from the couch and took a chunk of wood from the bin on the hearth and used it to rearrange the burning logs before dropping the new one on top. Fire leapt up to it from below and a puff of slow

That's what I said.

Remember that wolf they trapped down in Morgan? said Daneen, rising and padding into the kitchen. She filled a small plastic watering can and returned and soaked the dirt around the areca's base. Maybe it's back.

They shot that one, said Clark. And those boys insisted it was not a wolf. And not a cat either.

Well, what then? A bear?

Clark let his gaze drift to the window, where the snow still piled against the pane. I can't imagine so, but that's what they said. Said it took a sheep and left tracks with only three toes on the rear foot. He leaned to reach his coffee and sat back and took a big swallow.

Three toes? Daneen exclaimed. Like Old Ephraim in all them old stories? They must be pulling your leg.

Could be. I'll take a sled up there tomorrow and check it out. Maybe they're just making excuses. Thought we had another couple weeks to get that camp and them sheep out of there, but I guess ol' Mother Nature had a different idea.

I still can't believe it's snowed so much! said Daneen, shaking her head. Who ever heard of three feet in October?

Steam billowed from the pair of horses' flaring nostrils, wisps of it curling from the shoulders and flanks before disappearing into the frozen air. They plodded along, each step surging through the powder as if it were surf, the sounds of their breathing and the scrunching of the snow muted by the blanketed landscape all around.

The dark brown eyes of the riders pecked from the bundle of their caps and kerchiefs, their too-thin ranch jackets with the collars turned up bulging with the bulk of all their clothes underneath. When they rounded a wind-whipped stand of big tooth maples and a bushy draw opened to the right, they sat the horses, looking up to where the draw wound out of view.

"It's too cold," said Tomas.

"Yeah," said Jago. "It's no good for the horses working through snow like this. They're going to break their legs."

Tomas pointed at the weather-bleached branches of a fallen pine jutting from the snow. "We can tether them there," he said. "The sun's moving that way, so they'll stay in it, might be a little better than going up with us."

They worked the horses into the sunlight and slid off, sinking into the snow up to their knees. They hoofed up to the crust and took to stamping all around to pack down the snow.

Tomas pulled his rifle from the saddle scabbard and slung it across his back.

"Do we need that?" asked Jago.

"Can't hurt," said Tomas. "And if we do need it, better to take it now than to have to come back."

Jago nodded and unsheathed his rifle and checked the safety. They each said reassuring things quietly to their horses, and then tramped up into the draw, post-holing and sliding in their slick heeled riding boots.

"How can people live in this stuff?" groaned Tomas after sinking into a drift to his waist.

Jago held a cottonwood with one hand and offered the other to Tomas to pull himself out. He laughed. "The drifts are always deeper, T."

A thicket of shrub willow and maple had overrun the drainage, right up to the cottonwoods and firs covering the hillsides, making it difficult for the two men to pass, and harder still for them to see. After thirty minutes of tedious slogging and dodging, they stopped in a clearing at the top of a rise to take a breath and look back toward the horses.
Still there, Tomas’s roan and Jago’s bay huddled together in the blindingly bright sunshine. They looked small in the snowy, sage-dotted range that spilled out behind them, beneath the green conifered peaks and the heavy cobalt sky above.

The two men trudged on round a bend, finally out of the shadows. The shrub maples spread and thickened across the bottom of the draw; too dense, even with most of their leaves blown off, to see through.

Tomas heard it first. A low rumbling, like a deep and satisfying belch, turning plaintive at the end. He whispered, “You heard that, right?”

Jago held a finger to his lips.

Standing shoulder to shoulder, they scanned the brush, watching for movement. A cold wind channeled down the draw, rattling the maples and piercing straight through their thin jackets. Together they edged to the right, trying to see around a thicket of willow shrubs just ahead. On the higher ground, they could see better, breaks of snow at least here and there farther up the draw.

“How do we know there’s any sheep up here anyway?” Tomas whispered.

“Mr. Clark said so, said he saw them last week from that bluff,” said Jago, pointing to the line of white marking the road near the top of the mountain beyond them. “And besides, when we brought in the flock, the count was off.”

“Okay, yeah, but that was last week, who knows where they are now?”

“Shh,” whispered Jago. “Let’s at least get up around that bend. If the little bleaters are up there, we’ll see them.”

Jago in the lead now, they continued up the side of the draw to an outcrop of rock, scrubbed to its top, and scanned the shrubby drainage below.

Forty yards ahead, in the center of a heavily trampled clearing, a splotch of bright red snow shone like a target where a sheep carcass lay, its splintered ribs and bloody leg bones exposed. A track led away from the spot into a thicket of shrub maple. At the top of the draw, below a hundred-foot bluff, six sheep huddled together, bleating nervously, apparently trapped. From the trees to the left, something big had left a track coming down into the brush.

“Shit,” gasped Tomas.

“Mr. Clark will want to know what it was,” whispered Jago.

“You’re crazy. Whatever it is, it’s too close.”

“Probably just a dog. Pumas don’t rumble like that anyway,” Jago unslung his rifle and levered a shell into the chamber. Clicking the safety off, he said, “Cover me from up here.”

“Hey, Crazy, you’re no John fucking Wayne, and neither am I. Cover you?”

“It’s okay.”

“There’s grizzlies up in Yellowstone. They rumble like that, and these .22s won’t do shit to them.”

Jago looked at the carcass, then swept his gaze to the sheep below the bluff. “I’m going,” he said. He slipped off the boulder and crept down toward the clearing.

“Shit,” whispered Tomas again. He unslung his rifle and weighed it for a moment in his hands. “They’re not even our sheep.” He found a good shooting stance and laid his finger across the trigger, aiming at the thicket.

On his knees and elbows now, carefully keeping his rifle clear of the snow, Jago crept toward the closest track. He plucked away a few tufts of bloody wool, and peered down into the print.

A bellowing roar rumbled from the shrub maple thicket, which began to shake.

Crack! Twigs snapped in the thicket as Tomas’s gunshot echoed off the bluff.

Jago rolled backward, accidentally jamming his rifle barrel into the snow. He stumbled to his feet and raced down the draw, careening into bushes, hurdling awkwardly through the snowdrifts.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Tomas emptied the four-round clip into the thicket and leapt down the embankment after Jago as another bellowing groan pierced the air. They charged through the brush, not looking back, scrambling and sliding all the way down to the horses.

Heaving for breath, leaning against the flank of the bay, Jago slung a string of curses up the drainage.

“Mr. Clark promised no bears,” gasped Tomas. “But that sure as hell sounded like one to me.”

“No joke,” said Jago, heaving for air, his eyes still wide. “The claw marks in that track must have been four inches off the toes.”

Jesus, Dec, said Zack. There’s so much blood.

Dec looked up at him from where he knelt in the snow, the sheep’s head pinned firmly beneath his shin, the slit throat gushing red, its steam rising, and said, Well, yeah, what’d you expect?
I expected it, sure, said Zack, watching Dee cut tufts of wool and scatter them around him. Dee’s beard, cap and sunglasses were spattered with blood. It’s just kind of…shocking, how bright it all is…on the snow, I mean.

That’s what we want, I think, said Dee. He scanned the scene around them. We ought to kick up these tracks a little more; it doesn’t look much like a kill site to me yet.

Zack nodded. He laid out spreadeagle, pressing a plaster cast with strings hanging from it about a foot deep into the snow. Is anyone really going to see these, he said, and think ghost bear?

Dee turned his head away from the gore and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Everybody knows they killed Old Ephraim up here, he said. We’ll put pictures of all the tracks in the packet we send the newspaper. That rear metatarsal with just three phalanges, the others together, trust me.


shoulder and ribs that he dropped into a plastic freezer bag. He cut out the stomach and intestines and let them slide down into the snow, then pulled a hatchet from his backpack and began stuffing the bags inside.

Maybe I’m cynical, said Zack, but I doubt anyone will get that killing all of Utah’s grizzlies was a stupid sheepherder’s way of thinking. But either way, when this comes out in the paper, people are going to FREAK! He grinned and pointed at the snow around them. What do you think, another anterior print over here too, a posterior there, and...

Perfect, said Dee, slamming the hatchet into the sheep’s vertebrae just below the skull.

Zack flopped over to the carcass, then stood. He tied the plaster casts to the toes of his boots, belted two ponderosa branches to his stomach, then held the front casts in his hands as he circled the site several times on all fours, then made his way up to the trees. The belted branches slid along the snow, making a trough and roughing up the edges of the tracks. At the top he looped in and out of the trees, then came back down, hammering it up, rolling his shoulders and waddling his rear like a bear.
Whirling snow obliterated the sky. Dense, wet air from a warm Pacific had cruised over the Great Basin without losing a drop, but when it met the season’s first big cold front racing down the spine of the Rockies, it dumped everything it had.

The fat, wet flakes clung to the conifer branches and knocked loose all of fall’s last colors. They piled up in inches, then feet, whitening the mountain tops first, then blanketing the jeep ruts and campites and trails, erasing, just for one fleeting geologic blink, every last sign of human dominion.