

# **TOP DOG**

Jerry Jay Carroll

This book is a work of fiction; the premise and plot are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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Other books by Jerry Jay Carroll:

*Inhuman Beings*

*Dog Eat Dog*

*A Dog's Life*

*The Great Liars*

*For my wife the poet.*

“This generation, and many others, have been led to believe that the devil is a myth, a figure, an idea, the idea of evil. But the devil exists and we must fight against him.” – Pope Francis

“War is evil, but it is often the lesser evil.” – George Orwell

## CHAPTER ONE

Running. One minute oblivion and the next I am in a forest, the fading day sending weak shafts of sunshine through the trees. Quail scurry and small animals freeze as I cross ground dappled in shadow and light. The wind is in my face and nothing seems more natural than running. It is the beginning and the end and everything in between.

At first, I have no questions about my place in the scheme of things, but it dawns on me there is something wrong: I detest exercise. If it didn't alert the nosy regulators that infest Wall Street like vermin, I'd step from my armored Rolls and ride a sedan chair to the lobby of the skyscraper that bears my name in sleek signage. Times what they are, my bearers would be a multi-culti lot, a rainbow of muscular young men, hetro and homo, lifting me above the masses with their fevers and colds, and those fearsome viruses from far-off jungles that are blown into moist handkerchiefs or hawked with repulsive sounds onto the pavement. Winter is worse, but no season is without its... the flicker of feet beneath catches my eye. But astonishingly they aren't feet, they are paws with claws. Something soft and wet bangs the side of my face. It is my tongue. The realization slowly dawns as I run. I'm a dog—a huge, panting dog.

A running dog has a brain on sensory overload. It can't handle the rush of smells the nose pulls in, each with its own mental picture. I'm aware of a rotting deer carcass and master an urge to stop and roll on it. Each tree has its own unique sappy smell, as does pale fungus in damp leaf mold. I smell birds in beshitted nests and berries and nuts, the one full of juice and the other bitter oil. Worms work in the earth with sightless stealth. Stagnant ponds teem with odorous life. The forest floor is still warm from those mote-filled pillars of daylight that expire one by one as night comes on. There are countless insects chewing, sawing, and boring. Two squirrels make for the safety of trees, a badger rumbles with menace. I smell three rabbits paralyzed with fear, a fox tracking a lizard, a skunk asleep in a hole, and there are all sorts of other animals I'm not going to mention. Hundreds of smells. They crowd in like Japanese on a bullet train and my brain works like crazy to sort them out.

That's just part of the overload. My ears are pricked, scooping in a cacophony worthy of these high-brow modern composers that phonies close their eyes and pretend to like. In earlier times—I won't say they were more civilized, but by God they were more honest—a man could use

his walking stick on their backs without fear of consequence. You didn't need to be a seedy music critic to give some symphony hall charlatan the benefit of your opinion—or anyone else in public life for that matter. Caning is what they called it back then; friends would shake your hand afterward at the club and... I scan the ground ahead, picking a path past boulders, between trees, over exposed roots, down tunnels of ferns. The world is full of danger. Quick reactions mean you go on living; slow ones are punished by death or injury, which comes to the same thing in this place. There's no time for cognitive thought, to use a term that pops into my head. Words or phrases step forward to remind me I used to be different. Sometimes they are like puzzle pieces with no meaning on their own. Other times they fit the subject at hand. Subject at hand—there's another example.

I come to a dinky village toward sundown and don't even slow down. I lope down the middle of a rutted road between cottages of weathered stone and thatched roofs that face each other like bankrupts without hope. Their shuttered windows are like eyes shut tight to trouble. Toothless old crones in bare feet and rags shrink back as if the Devil passes among them. Starving curs with rib cages sticking out rush toward me, yapping abuse. They skid to comic stops when they get a better look and streak back, nearly bowling over the old hags.

Out of the village and back into the trees, the yammering of the dogs fading behind. I stop to lap water from a cold creek pouring over smooth rocks and lie down to rest, panting. What did I have for dinner to bring on a dream this vivid? I gave up Mexican food after Beano stopped working. It's a pretty spooky forest now that I notice. Big, dark trees with moss that hangs like thick spider webs. Plenty of spiders, too, big ugly brutes with hairy legs. At the outer limit of my hearing, the trees seem to talk to each other. They grumble slow dark words in a language as gnarly as bark.

I must have been running a long time. I put nose to paws and it's buh-bye, lights out. *Zzz*. A dog can conk out after no more than ten seconds. Yet we're light sleepers; as I said, the world's full of menace and you keep one ear open. I wake up refreshed and yawn so hard a whine is squeezed out; I give myself a good shake to arrange my pelt. It would be dark if it weren't for a fat, yellow moon. There's something about the moon. It just hangs there making you sad. I throw my head up and howl, moving through the canine scale and throwing in some yipping for variety. Others far off take it up after a while, short barks followed by a long *Oooooo*, and I reply even more mournfully. Time passes and I notice their howls are closer. Then I get it. Rather than comments on the sorrows of life, those howls are signals. It is a pack of wolves.

I make tracks. Not rushing off blindly, because you can't keep that up forever. When a pack is on your tail, it's a marathon. Start out burning rubber like a hare and pretty soon you're flopped down, out of gas, squealing as they rip your windpipe out.

How do I know this?

Your guess is as good as mine; dog wisdom, maybe. So a steady ground-eating lope is smart. Hunting packs are hard to keep together; the group is important, but each looks out for Number One. If a wolf comes across something better than object being pursued or looks like less work for the payoff, it drops out. It seems like the muttering forest is on their side. I keep tripping over exposed roots, and branches slap my face like they are challenging me to a duel. Once or twice, it even seems the boles of trees bend toward one another like nutcrackers closing. But the pack falls behind.

I see a clearing ahead and make for it, suddenly coming out onto a vast moonlit plain. One minute the thick forest and the next the wide open spaces. It's as if somebody drew a line with a ruler. The moon is so bright you could read a newspaper if they had them here, which I doubt. Those crones had a real third world look; not enough teeth among them to skin a cob of corn.

I can see for miles. The plain is covered with tall grass. With its long swells, it looks like an ocean frozen in a photograph. I pick up the spoor of small rodents living in a large colony. Their twittering makes me realize I'm hungry. Whatever it was that gave me this dream didn't stick to the ribs. Maybe it was Chinese gone bad.

Whatever these little creatures are, they're nosy; it makes them easy pickings. Choose a hole and lie down beside it, and you can bank on one of their prosperous citizens popping up to see what's going on. I nail a fat one after five minutes of stakeout. One shake and he's off to rodent heaven as the neighbors whistle warnings to one another. What does it feel like? Warm blood like au jus fills the mouth. Eat as little hide and hair as possible, and be careful with the bones. As for taste, I wouldn't recommend it. Too gamey.

It isn't enough, but it will keep me going. I'm licking my chops when something busts out of the woods heading straight at me. A wolf, most likely the leader of the pack. I take off running, heading for the horizon where the moon sinks in the star-filled sky. I high-tail it for a mile before stopping for a look. Still only him; his pals crapped out on him.

Damned if I'm going to run off every one of those calories I just ate, so I wait for him. I guess he thinks I'm played out and comes roaring up. I give him a shoulder and he gives out a grunt and reels back in surprise.

“You want trouble, pal?” I snarl. “I’ll give you all you need.”

He says something in wolf I don’t get. Even if he hadn’t been chasing me, I’d hate him for his wild fury. Check out the difference between the eyes of a dog and a wolf and you’ll see what I mean. Wolves thought too much of themselves to cut a deal with humans, and they hate us because we did. Their story is they had too many principles to sell out. So in winter they freeze their ass off nosing through snow in hope of a meal. Meanwhile, we’re full-bellied and farting by some human’s fire.

We circle each other. Big as he is, I tower over him.

“Why chase me?” I ask. Imagine talking to a wolf.

Even crazier, he answers, sounding like he’s talking in some Visigoth dialect. “I’m going to rip your guts out. Your bones will be scattered from here to the dark mountains.”

We keep circling.

“Where am I?” I ask. It would be nice to get that cleared up even if this is just a dream; Felicity would be interested.

“Where you’ll die.”

No give in him at all. He has malignant eyes, and his lifted lips show nasty-looking teeth. His face is scarred; I assume from the constant battle to stay on top as the alpha male.

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” I joke. Scary as he looks, I feel loose and confident, and why not? Nobody dies in his own dreams.

He sneers. “I wouldn’t lift a leg on any bitch that would let a coward mount her.” He stops circling. “Lay on your back. Maybe I won’t kill you.”

“Take your best shot,” I say.

He drives at me snapping and we rise on hind legs to spar. He’s fast and sneaky, feinting one way and coming another; I can see why he bosses the pack. I’m stronger, but it takes a while to figure out his style. When I do, it’s time for the fat lady to sing.

“Want to quit?” I ask. He’s finished, panting and spurting blood in three places. These teeth I’ve got are as sharp as the knives they sell on TV.

“Never!”

He flies at me again, and I have to kill him. Get jaws on his throat and squeeze until the life leaves. Live by the sword, die by it. An autopsy would say crushed windpipe. I look down at his body and feel nothing.

Hungry as I am, I resist the temptation to make a meal of him, although of course he wouldn't hesitate if the shoe was on the other foot. I pad toward the setting moon. Part of my mind monitors the environment—owls hoot, coyotes bark far off, the wind makes a lonely sound through the tall grass. The rest tries to figure out this dream. Then it dawns on me that it isn't a dream. The detail is too sharp and there aren't any time shifts or sudden scene changes.

I'm human, a pretty important one at that. So what am I doing here, a dumb beast? And where am I? How did I get here, a spell? Nobody believes in that crap. This is the Twenty-First Century, not the Middle Ages. Questions crowd in. For example, did I die and somehow wasn't aware of it?

Clouds of memories from the life I came from hover just on the edge of crystalizing, but as I try to call them up they fade like mist in the sun. Speaking of mist, a fog forms in the hollows and spreads over the grass. Moisture beads the blades and I lick them. The long run and fight left me thirsty.

Pretty soon, the moon is just a milky disc through the fog. A loon flies overhead making sad cries. I become aware of—well, not figures, call them shadows. It's as if the fog thickens in spots. I can't smell them, not even with my dog nose. Dozens move slowly through the fog in all directions. Despite their numbers, each seems terribly alone.

They don't notice me, but when I spot one of them I veer off to be on the safe side. Every now and then one cuts loose a moan that makes that loon sound like the Bluebird of Happiness.

I can't tell if they are wandering without purpose or looking for something they lost. If the latter is the case, it doesn't seem from the moans they have much hope of finding it. After a while, the ground begins to rise and the fog thins. As it does, I see fewer and fewer, and then they're gone. I'd say they were lost souls wandering in purgatory—if I believed in souls and purgatory. But I'm a brass-bound atheist. Peddle that mumbo-jumbo someplace else.

The moon goes down and the stars are brighter like the dimmer switch on them was turned up. I wish I'd paid more attention to astronomy so I could tell if it is the same sky I am used to. Dawn is near; I know that from some instinct. I don't see any point in changing directions. When there's a gray edge to the eastern sky, I stumble across a covey of quail scratching in the dirt. I nab a fat one before he can even squawk, and that's breakfast. Spitting out the last of the feathers, I look for a place to rest. There is a leafless tree that looks as if the earth raised a bony hand against a blow. When I get there, I take a careful look around and test the wind. It's free of menace. I turn in

a circle three times to drive off snakes—more dog instinct—cover my nose with my tail, and sink into dreamless sleep.

I sleep a couple hours. After a good shake to get the dust off, I press on. I have gone so far I don't see the tree line behind me anymore. I'm belly-deep in grass and the plain looks endless. Not another soul in sight; it's an empty, lonely place. The blue sky is like a bowl overhead and there is intimidating silence. It gets hotter as the day wears on. Mountains gradually become visible far off, the ones the wolf said my bones would be scattered to, I guess. I top a rise and before me is an immense battlefield. Skeletons lay as they had fallen. They stretch to the horizon, picked clean; bleached by the sun and polished by the wind. Vultures and maggots must have fed to bursting. Some were men, some horses. Most, horse and man alike, wore armor that is rusted and brittle from exposure to the elements. Spears, swords, and shields lay everywhere. Maybe this is the Middle Ages after all.

I see an animal near one of the skeletons and move toward it. It's a mangy-looking fox. He cringes in terror, belly to the ground.

"You don't want me," he whines. "There's no more to me than this." He withdraws from the bone he'd been gnawing on.

"What happened here?" I ask.

He seems surprised. "What happened? The Two Legs fought. What else? That's all they do, isn't it? When they're not trying to kill us?" He has a country twang.

"When did this happen?"

The fox shrugs. "Before my mother was born and her mother too." His eyes slide side to side.

"Don't worry; I'm not going to hurt you."

He looks at me with hope, but it fades fast. "You're a dog, aren't you? Dogs kill my kind if you catch us."

"I'm not a dog."

"All right; wolf," he says tiredly. "My eyes aren't what they were. You talk different, though."

"I'm not a wolf either."

"What are you, then?"

"What you call a Two Legs."

He's disgusted now. "Only cats play with what they catch." He rolls over on his back and offers his throat.

"I said I wasn't going to hurt you."

There's silence between us. Then it seems he decides he'll play along and gets on his feet.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Where?" He gazes around. "Here."

"I mean, what's this place called?"

"It's called here. What else would it be called?"

"Does it have a name?"

"Here. It's called here." He sighs as if he is dealing with an idiot.

I study him. Scrawny, dull coat, dry nose; definitely down on his luck.

"Are you hungry?"

"I can't remember the last time I ate." A sad shake of his head. "I'm too slow anymore. One day I can keep my belly full, and the next day I can't. I've been waiting for The Call."

"Stay here," I say.

He lies down and wraps his tail around his feet. "I don't have the strength to do anything else."

It takes me half an hour to find a jackrabbit. He sits still too long, maybe thinking I don't spot him. I get him before he can get up to warp speed and leave me in the dust. I take him back to the fox.

"This is yours." I drop the jack in front of him.

He's suspicious.

"You're giving me that?"

"Yes. It's yours."

He sniffs it, trying to figure out what the catch is. Then hunger gets the best of him, and he makes fast work of the rabbit.

"Name's Quick," he says, licking his chops and looking stronger already. "What's yours?"

"I don't have one."

"That's unusual for a dog; you're great ones for names. Where you from?"

I jerk my muzzle in the direction I had come. "That way."

"Nothing that way except the Terrible Woods. Nobody goes there."

"Why not?"

"Stories they tell."

"What kind of stories?"

He begins grooming himself, pulling with teeth at snarls in his coat. "Never paid much attention. Animals go there and don't come back is what you hear."

‘There are wolves there.’

He gives a short bark of laughter. ‘Something worse than wolves. They say the trees talk.’

‘They do; I heard them.’

He pauses in his grooming. ‘What’d they say?’

‘I couldn’t make it out. It didn’t sound nice, though.’

‘What were you doing there; are you crazy or something, going there?’

‘I haven’t figured that out yet. What’s in those mountains ahead?’

He looks toward the far-off peaks. ‘Trouble. Trouble’s everywhere these days.’

‘I’m headed that way. Want to go?’

Quick gives it some thought. ‘Nothing much around here for me anymore,’ he says at last.

‘You wouldn’t think it to look at me now, but I was once pretty big in these parts; had any female I wanted. Eight, nine litters, I can’t remember them all. Then I started losing fights when spring comes. Young punks I would have beat easy before. Well, you know how that goes; the ladies like the winners. I’ve been alone for a couple years now. Empty burrows and an empty belly.’ He takes a long, sad look around. ‘Sure, why not? I’ll go with you.’

We trot panting under the hot sun toward the mountains, fainter now in the heat that makes far-off things dance and squirm. Quick explains points of interest. ‘Caught me two cooing birds near that rock once. That’s where I found a deer with a broken leg. Lucky nothin’ bigger came round, ‘cept some cleanup birds. It fed me for a whole week. There’s water under that tree if you dig; tastes funny, though. There’s better yonder a ways.’

I was back to thinking it was a dream, and I hoped I would remember the details. Felicity would find all kinds of meaning in it; guilt, suppressed longings, all that Doctor Phil crap. I wonder who Felicity is.

‘See those rocks? I hid under them once when a Uulebeet flew overhead. He didn’t see me, otherwise I wouldn’t be here today.’

‘What’s a Uulebeet?’

He looked at me as if I was playing more mind games. ‘Everybody knows that.’

‘Not me.’

‘Never seen one flying? Big and ugly, skin like a snake? Claws as long as your face and teeth even bigger. They smell like something a cleanup bird puked out. They’re devils that scout for Mogwert.’

“Who’s Mogwert?”

“Don’t fool with me!” He trotted growlingly for a minute, getting madder with every step. “I thank you for not killing me,” he burst out. “But it don’t give you the right to treat me like I’ve got an empty head.”

We pressed on in silence. Quick was a talker, though, and couldn’t shut up for long. He reminisced about mates. They had names like White Paw and Half Ear.

“Sunrise was the nicest. She was the first. I fought a lot before I won her.”

Don’t foxes mate for life? It was one of those things I seemed to know from before. Knowledge lay dormant in my head, waiting for the light on to be turned on. Sometimes it was a word; other times a smell or sight. I asked about the mating.

“I would’ve with Sunrise. She was everything you’d want in a bitch; caught mice like nobody’s business. She found more quail’s eggs than anyone, and never fell for that broken-wing trick that fools so many. Real nice to be around. I don’t just mean her sex hole, either. We’d sit and look at things get dark at the end of day and not say nothin’; just enjoy bein’ together. She was smarter than me, if you want to know the truth. Braver too. Six pups in her first litter. Kept us both busy feeding them. Until ... ” Quick fell silent.

“Until what?”

“Until Mogwert got her and the pups. I came back one day and they were all gone. Mogwert smell was all over; it burns your nose. It’s worse than the hot springs where the earth farts, worse than Uulebeets even.”

“Why did they take Sunrise and the pups?”

“They were takin’ a lot of little ones at that time. Lions, bears, deer, cats, rabbits—didn’t make no difference, they just took ‘em. Sunrise put up a fight, but it was no good; I smelled her death. Don’t know why they took her along, she being dead. To feed on, probably.” He was quiet for a while. “She was the best. I barked at the moon I don’t know how many nights.”

We stop to drink at a spring, and the water gurgles in our guts. The plains look scalded in the white glare and insects drone. We lay in the shadow of rocks to escape the sun. I dream I’m in a room with a dozen TV screen. Numbers scroll across the screens and headlines crawl at the bottom. I know something they don’t and it makes me laugh. As I turn to boast about it to someone, a noise wakes me.

Quick was still snoozing, dreaming with his lips pulled back in a noiseless snarl. His teeth were yellow and broken and the gums shrunken. He smelled bad, as if that jackrabbit had blocked up the works. If I hadn't come along, he would have died before long. That was probably what waiting for The Call means. Weaken here and the curtain drops pretty fast. More dog wisdom.

What did that dream mean? What was I doing and why aren't I still there lording it over those clueless nobodies? That was where I belonged, not on this hot plain with only a fox to talk to. A *fox*. What did I know the others didn't as I stared down at those screens? I scratched behind one ear with a hind paw. Fleas. Quick opened a bleary eye.

"Let's get going," I said.

He shook himself, his legs so wobbly that he nearly fell. "Why do you want to go to those mountains?"

"I don't know."

"Then why go?"

"Just because." Something told me I didn't want to know the reason why.

Afternoon was fading when I heard a sound like the wind beginning to rise. But it was dead calm. "Do you hear that?"

Quick pricked his ears; one was notched from an old fight. "I hear it."

A couple of miles ahead, a dark cloud was moving across the plain toward us. Now the sound was like the hum of a power plant.

Quick's eyes bulged, he was that scared.

He high-tailed it and I followed. "An old den's not far," he yelled. "Nobody's been there for a long time."

"What are we running from?" I yelled back.

"Eaters."

The hum got louder and the cloud was closer. I shot looks behind. It rose two hundred feet above the ground and was easily a mile wide. Everyone was hauling ass. Hares, antelope, and other creatures were going as fast as they could. We zipped past a tortoise lumbering at its best speed.

"Not far now," Quick gasped. The ground dropped and he disappeared. I saw his tail go down a hole at the foot of a tree. We wiggled down past hairy roots. The tunnel took a turn and when I bumped against Quick it was as dark as the grave.

"What now?" I asked.

Before he could answer, the hum grew deafening. Dozens of insects came swarming down the tunnel, then hundreds. They burrowed into my fur and bit. I snapped at them, crushing the little bastards right and left. Quick was doing the same, yelping.

“I’m getting out of here!” I shouted.

“No!” he cried. “They’ll get in your eyes and your nose and mouth and crawl right into your guts.”

What seemed like hours passed, but probably was only minutes. The roar outside faded away as if a dial was turned down. I pushed up the tunnel, nearly crazy from the bugs. Outside, laggards were trying to catch up with the main body. They smacked into me and crawled buzzing underfoot, but the black cloud was a quarter-mile away already. It looked like the twister in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Quick panted at my side. “Lucky I remembered that den.”

We scratched and shook until all the bugs were off. They had round faces and needle-sharp little teeth. “Trees that talk, ghosts, eaters,” I said. “What else has this place got?”

Quick crunched one of them. “They’re not too bad. They’ll fill your belly, anyway.”

He was right. They weren’t bad. We passed the tortoise, just skeleton and shell. “They never leave anything,” Quick said after giving it a sniff.

I’m learning you can’t be a picky eater here; you have to keep the furnace stoked. You eat even when you’re gorged and think you can’t take another bite because a couple of days might pass before the next meal turns up. It has to be really gross before I turn up my nose.

## CHAPTER TWO

*The Wizard of Oz*. How did I remember that, and even know how the story went? Little girl runs away from home with dog, gets conked on head, and wakes up in a weird place. Scarecrow, Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, Wicked Witch, etc. All she wants is to get home again like me. I saw it maybe ten times when I was a kid. The point was it was just a dream.

Maybe I got knocked unconscious like Dorothy. Came out of a building and slipped on ice or something, and now I was in a hospital with tubes stuck in me having this dream. Some say the only reality is neurons and synapses and the rest of it doing their thing inside your skull. When you die, the universe does too. If you point out that millions die every day but the world goes on, the eggheads say that's just part of the dream. I had a hunch I hadn't wasted a lot of thought on this sort of thing before, and I sure didn't see any point to it now.

But say I *was* lying in a hospital bed, just needing a good pinch to wake me up. I would get my clothes on and head for the nearest bar for a couple to oil the machinery and then get on with life.

"What're you doin'?" Quick asked. "Only time I saw anybody bite themselves was when they went crazy from eatin' pink weed."

"I'm trying to wake up from this dream."

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm having a dream and you're part of it."

"Me part of a dog's dream? Ha! You're crazy, all right." He trotted toward the mountains with a look that said this was so beneath him.

The pinch-me-and-I'll-wake-up theory didn't hold water, unless I was just now dreaming I was biting myself on the ass. So a dream within a dream? You could kick this around until the cows came home.

Another idea. I wasn't the superstitious type, but what if I had crossed somebody with dark powers? Let's say a witch for the sake of argument, and this witch casts a spell that puts me here. Maybe she's mad because her pension money was eaten up in the scam I was running and is out for revenge. Worst-case scenario, maybe it was a Bernie Madoff scheme that took in thousands of suckers. Strange I can remember *The Wizard of Oz* but not what I was up to beyond that feeling I

had pulled the wool over the eyes of some pretty sharp operators, hence the pardonable pride. On the other hand, maybe this witch was a broad I was banging and she got steamed when I called it quits. Hell hath no fury and all that. But if this was punishment, wouldn't it be better if I knew what I did? If I'm not mistaken, the goal of punishment is to get the wrongdoer to think about what he did and feel sorry, not blunder around in some demented fantasy and not know why.

We passed through the devastation left by the eaters. They had chewed up everything in their path; the long prairie grass was clipped as short as a fairway. Animals that didn't get away were covered with the bastards still chewing away. Their jaws sounded like tiny castanets.

"When they're full," Quick said, "they dig into the ground and you don't see them no more until the next time,"

At the end of the day the mountains didn't look any closer. "How much farther?" I asked Quick.

"Tomorrow we'll be as far as I've ever been." He looked uneasy. "It's not right to go where you never been."

"What if Christopher Columbus thought that?"

"Who?"

"He discovered America." It's not PC to say that, but who gives a shit.

"What's America?"

"Forget it."

You couldn't have a conversation with Quick that went much beyond how fresh those rabbit pellets were, and where might that meal be now.

We went in different directions to scare up dinner, but we both struck out. I picked up the scent of a rat, but it was hours old. He was probably back in his hole humping Mrs. Rat. I checked out Quick's breath when he met again to make sure he wasn't holding out on me.

"This country's never been much good for the belly." He lay down, covered his tail with his nose, and started snoring. I was so sad that when the moon came up I climbed a knoll and howled. A minute later Quick was by my side yipping.

Later that night toward morning, a thought came to me.

What's my name?

I jumped to my feet. "Uulebeets?" Quick asked wildly.

"I forgot my name!"

Quick lay back down, grumbling that there had been enough crazy talk for him.

I paced back and forth, whining. I would have held my head if I'd had hands. Why did it take this long to realize I didn't know my own name? If you can't remember your name, you might as well give it up.

Sidney, Fred, John, Phillip, Morton, Norton, Horton—I could be any one of them. There are hundreds of first names, and that's the easy part. Get into last names, and the sky's the limit. What did I look like? Another good question. Tall, short, thin, fat? Jowly or chiseled? Blond, dark? Bald, curly-headed? Middle-aged, old?

Who is Felicity?

Maybe my name was floating around in my brain waiting for the right association to turn on the light bulb. I concentrated, commanding my mind to deliver. No soap. Whoever put me in this pickle was more evil than I thought. It was bad enough being a stranger (and a dog!) in a strange land, but a stranger who doesn't even know who he is or what he is doing here—that is diabolical.

Maybe I had made a pact with the Devil the way what's-his-name did and welched on the deal. I got dragged to an opera where fat people sang about that very subject. I had fallen asleep before the end, so any tips I might have picked up for dealing with Satan weren't in my memory core even if I could access it. It was strange to remember the opera, and cruel I had missed the part that might help me. I wouldn't think you would want to screw around with Lucifer if you had a deal, but maybe I was desperate. Short on a margin call out of the blue; the Feds talking about an indictment, et cetera. Get yourself in a bad enough squeeze and anything goes.

I picked up the sound of something scratching upwind. My nose told me jackrabbit; the country was lousy with them. I flattened out belly to the ground and crawled. At the end of my creep, I was ten yards away from the target. His ears were scissoring back and forth, so he suspected something was up. It was just light enough so you could begin to pick things out. I lunged and nailed him two yards before he would have been gone for good. A feeble struggle and then it was breakfast time.

I was hungry enough to finish it off myself, but Quick showed up to panhandle. When the edge was off my hunger, I said, "The rest is yours." He grinned and cavorted on his rickety legs. We rested until sunrise.

A good thing about being a dog is when you get up you don't worry about brushing your teeth, shaving, wardrobe choices, or the rest of it. One shake and you're ready for whatever the day

brings. We set out toward the mountains again; they were lavender in the fresh morning light. I mulled over more names. David, Eric, James, Arnold, Peter?

The land softened from staring plains to seeming as if it had been farmed long ago. We followed the faint traces of roads until they petered out, and passed through overgrown orchards, and then the ruins of small villages. It looked like war had blasted them to rubble. We took a detour when Quick or I spotted a big cat or a bear ambling along. There were plenty of wolverines, stringy coyotes, and grazers like elk and antelope that watched us from a distance. At noon we came to a small, rotting bridge over a stream. We started to cross when my nose picked up a swampy, hairy smell, old and obsolete.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Quick said.

“That smell.”

He tested the air. “Nasty, ain’t it?”

By then we were mid-span.

“Hold up,” I said. “It’s under the bridge.” Quick spun and ran back, with me on his heels.

Just as we made it to the end of the bridge, I saw a blur from the corner of my eye; it was something trying to head us off. We stopped at a safe distance and looked back. On either side of the bridge were two of the ugliest things you ever saw. They were wet-looking and kind of purplish with warty lumps all over. Greasy, lank hair hung down over their faces. They had squashed-in mugs with yellow fangs and red eyes.

“Trolls,” Quick said, shivering. “They nearly got us.”

I looked at him in amazement. “Trolls?”

“Once they were gone from the world; then Mogwert brought them back.”

Trolls. I was in a fairy tale.

Quick and I waded across the river upstream and pressed on toward the mountains, now close enough so I could begin to pick out detail. They were dark and gloomy, as if they hid bad secrets. They could keep them as far as I was concerned.

What more could happen? I was a dog in a fairy tale, unless I was lucky enough to be comatose in a hospital dreaming all this.

“Have you ever seen Mogwert?” I asked Quick.

“Once.”

“What’d they look like?”

“Dark.”

“What else?”

“Just dark, like they sucked in the light. Everything around them was gray, like at the end of day. And they steal the warm. Dark and cold; that’s all I can say. I was comin’ out of a burrow when I saw them. I went right back down and stayed there with my tail over my face, and didn’t come up until the next day. Where Mogwert’d been it was like winter passed through. Flowers were black like they’d been touched by frost. Trees lost all their leaves.”

“Is Mogwert big or little?”

“Dark. Cold and dark.”

Bill Ingersol. It suddenly popped into my head. That was my name, I was sure of it.

“Bill Ingersol.” I said it aloud.

Quick ignored me. “See them cleanup birds flyin’ over there? Might be there’s something for us.” A dozen or more circled in the cloudless sky, spiraling lower.

We topped a rise and spotted what was drawing them. It was a man lying on his back on the ground. The vultures landing and waddling toward him with their wings out for balance said he was near the end; they don’t hurry if they see any fight left. The boldest were already elbowing to be first in line for the eyeballs; they scattered squawking when we came closer. Quick hung back.

“It’s bad luck foolin’ with Two Legs,” he warned.

He was a big strapping man, handsome if a broken nose doesn’t give you trouble; red hair, freckles. He was wearing a kind of leather skirt and helmet and body armor. Roman-looking, if you know what I mean. He had been in a hell of a fight. The armor was dented and had a great tear in the chest plate. Dried blood was in the rip, which looked like it had been made by a can opener. One sandal was missing. He was muttering.

“Apian Bollard of the Farrow’s reporting.” His dark eyes that were fixed on something far away didn’t see us. “Early patrol—signs of nervousness by the animals, as though they were ...” His tongue licked cracked lips. “If I could just have a small drink of water, sir.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as if he was drinking. “Thank you, sir.”

He coughed wetly. “When we reached the deep ditch, we headed back as ordered. We saw evil portents—owls and bats flying in broad daylight. Strange monsters—hairy things with glaring eyes followed us but kept their distance. Something bad is beginning.”

I had never seen anybody dying before. You can read about it or see the Muslims chop off heads on YouTube, but it's different up close and personal. This guy was a total stranger, but I felt bad.

"Let's go," Quick whined, looking around edgily. "Let them have him."

Bollard looked like he'd been in a lot of wars. His hands were big and calloused and his arms were covered with old scars. His sword was a few feet away, the blade nicked and scored. His breathing through his broken nose started sounding ragged.

"It's all in my report." His hand moved toward a leather bag stuffed with something. He made a slight motion as if handing it to somebody.

"No, I don't need thanks. Just doing my duty as a Cor of the Third Dirk of the Farrows."

"C'mon," Quick said. "Let's go. He's trouble, like 'em all. Always been, always will. They'd be trouble even if they didn't stir up Mogwert."

I ignored him.

"Stronger this time," Bollard said. "All these years ... stronger. We thought we could ..." His cracked lips moved, but no sound came out. Then he spoke again, the words like they were pulled up from a deep well of emotion. "Thought we could pull back to the Fair Lands and they wouldn't follow. Wrong. Wrong."

A vulture, bigger than the rest, hopped closer. Quick rushed at it snarling and it flapped off. The rest retreated with spread wings like fat ladies running with raised skirts.

Quick returned. "We're askin' for it. Stayin' around is just askin' for it."

"What are we supposed to do, leave him for the birds?"

Quick looked surprised. "Unless you want to eat him yourself."

I was horrified. "What kind of animal do you take me for?"

"A dog."

"Never mind. And shut up. He's trying to talk."

I bent low, my muzzle nearly in his face. "Came at us just before dawn. Sentries sleeping, I think. In on us before we knew it. Pigs they were, but they could stand up." His right hand closed and waved back and forth as if he was swinging his sword.

He did that for a while. "I'm the only one who got away. My horse was killed when a Uulebeet found us in the open. I cut him up pretty good, but he got me too. Flew off dripping yellow blood; I kept going until I got back." His speech was getting slow and faint.

“Now, sir, if I could just rest for a little while.” He stopped breathing and that was it. Fini. He had a peaceful look on his face, like he had gone to a better place.

Quick stared toward the west. “I hope it’s not what I think it is.” His voice quavered. He was watching a dot in the sky. The vultures lifted off and flapped away in the opposite direction.

“Uulebeet,” Quick said. He was so scared a little trickle of urine dribbled and made a dark mark on the dirt.

Nearby there was a broken-down wall made of stones piled on each other that looked like it had been a corral ages ago. Quick headed for it as fast as his name.

I snatched up the leather bag with my teeth and followed. Hidden behind the ruined wall we heard the slow, steady approach of big wings. All the other sounds of nature—the *whirr* of insects, chirp of birds—everything fell away and it was silent.

I watched through a small chink in the wall. The Uulebeet was as big as a Volvo, and I would call it a cross between a snake and a bird. It was a dirty yellow with black beak and talons; its pale reptile’s eyes were as big as dinner plates and its muscles moved with repulsive smoothness under its taut skin. It landed heavily, kicking up dust, and looked around. Its head revolved at the end of a long neck corded with tendons. If I was dreaming, I had to hand it to myself; Lucas or Cameron didn’t come close. After a long look around, the Uulebeet swayed slowly toward the man. It nosed his body over and seemed to be looking for something.

The leather bag.

When it didn’t find it, it looked around again. It took a step toward the wall.

Wake up! The voice screamed in my brain. I hadn’t been this scared when they unsealed the indictment. Twenty-seven counts of fraud and SEC violations. “A million dollars if you get me out of this mess,” I told my lawyer, Bill Clancy.

“Try five million,” he said at the look on my face. “Plus expenses.”

That scene popped into my head as the Uulebeet decided whether it was worth the trouble of taking a look behind the wall. Terror must have broken down some barrier and freed the memory.

Luck went our way and it turned back to the dead man. It put one talon on his chest, reached down and plucked off his helmeted head as neatly as you would take a grape from the stem. Then it raised its wings, ran clumsily but swiftly, and was airborne, headed east. When the Uulebeet was far off, birds sang again and the insect drone started up like every form of life had been holding their breath.

“It didn’t eat the head,” Quick said. “Must be takin’ it back to the nest.”

We watched the Uulebeet until it was a tiny dot in the sky toward the mountains. By then the vultures were wheeling overhead again, waiting to see what we would do.

“Wonder why it didn’t take the whole thing,” Quick said, sniffing at the decapitated body. “What a stink. Not even those cleanup birds will touch it now.” He was right; the Uulebeet’s smell burned your nose.

“That something to eat?” Quick asked. He meant the bag.

“No.”

“What’re you gonna do with it?”

“I don’t know.”

“The Uulebeet’s going back to those mountains you’re so interested in,” Quick said.

“I noticed.”

Ever since I dropped into this nightmare, I had traveled toward those scary mountains; it was as if I was being pulled there. The question was, why? The closer we got, the worse the vibes.

“I bet that’s where Mogwert are,” I said.

Quick stopped dead in his tracks. “Mogwert?” he cried. He looked around wildly. “Where?”

“Those mountains are probably where they live.”

“Nobody knows where Mogwert live,” he said fearfully.

“Uulebeets—are they connected with Mogwert?”

Quick considered this and it looked like it was for the first time. “I believe they must be,” he decided. “You see Mogwert and pretty soon you’ll see Uulebeet. Or if you see Uulebeet, you’ll see Mogwert.”

We traveled four hours and Quick got tired, so we lay in the shade of a huge oak tree. I yawned. You don’t stay awake for long when you’re a dog; I’ve mentioned how fast it’s lights out when you put head to paws. You would think I’d dream about the Uulebeet or the trolls, those nightmares being so fresh. Instead, I’m in the Silver Cloud returning to Long Island. A beautiful woman is with as I tell the driver to speed up.

“I’m late,” I say.

In the rearview mirror the driver gives me a lewd wink. I don’t like familiarity and I’ll warn him of this later. Home is a big place built at the turn of the last century. The headlights flash across sweeping lawns as smooth as a billiard table, a horse barn partly hidden by trees, and a gazebo where Felicity

gives gala luncheons for charity in summer; Felicity being my wife, as I now remember. She married me for my money. That's all right, I married her for her social connections, which I find useful; the third marriage each for us.

I zip up, give my traveling companion five Benjamins, and step from the car. It returns at six o'clock in the morning, seven days a week, for the ride to Manhattan where I have offices in a midtown glass tower with my name. The doorman wears a Beefeater uniform and uses his stave to keep the bums moving. I pay a handsome bribe for that urban amenity, which is greatly appreciated by the tenants. Commercial office space is a dog-eat-dog world and you look for every edge you can get.

"You're late," Felicity says when I hurry in. "Dinner's about to be served."

"Sorry, darling," I say, pecking at the marble cheek turned to me. Tall, lean as a greyhound, and high cheekbones that say the steppes are in her pedigree. You know the sleek look if you read *Town and Country*.

Felicity wants to recreate the salon world where big shots and poets rubbed elbows. "The art of conversation has nearly expired," she says. It is one of her remarks that don't need an answer, so I don't. This, of course, illustrates her point; not that she wants much conversation from me.

Bored rich ladies adopt a charity or a cause; Felicity's is reviving "intelligent" conversation. She even got a government grant for a conference on ways to foster conditions to revive the *bon mot*. "People think they're spontaneous," she explains, "but they're not and never were. They require as much thought as poetry."

The money came from the same federal agency that gave tax dollars to a woman who paints pictures with her menses. You tell me the bigger waste of money. I sent a letter to my congressman to complain, unsigned as I was not born yesterday. Felicity has red hair and the temper that goes with it.

Wealthy grandees come to her levees, meaty gentlemen with red faces and rail-thin wives, some with faces made monstrous by plastic surgery. The guest lists gave readers the impression they had missed a major cultural event, and gossip columns were full of it for days. Guests emailed them aphorisms they claimed they'd said on the spur of the moment. The cagier ones hired writers beforehand for witty banter to toss out at the right moment.

I don't enjoy these dinners. Old-money bores are bad enough, but add diplomats blathering on with international bankers about Greece bailout bonds or some such subject nobody but them gives a shit about—well, not really my idea of a good time. Then you have the playwrights and poets, the

seedy literary types that gorge themselves like they've been living on beans and day-old buns and that drink prodigious amounts of my expensive liquor. You know they are composing savage paragraphs for the next book or play where the characters come in two colors, dull and stupid. I have recognized myself, thinly disguised or sometimes not at all, in several books and two plays. I could put up with it better if Felicity didn't forbid me from hustling her society friends. I put together business deals just this side of the law, and sometimes a hair on the other side when I miscalculate. It takes plenty of talking in my work to get things done, but I am supposed to limit myself to sports or the weather at these affairs.

The big brass plaque on the company door in my glass tower reads Ingersol, Drake and Burns. Drake and Burns aren't active anymore. We had seats on the New York Stock Exchange in the beginning, but trading was peanuts compared to what you make buying companies with hedge fund leverage and spinning off their assets. We ride the good times like a hawk in a thermal, and do better than most when things turn sour, thanks to how close I sail to the wind legalwise.

"He's so boring," I heard Felicity say one night as I wound up a story about one of my boardroom coups. I will stipulate it was one I had told more than once. Her voice rang out in a silence that fell just as everyone paused for a witticism.

I could have made points by coming up with something that would be quoted in her *Anthology of Modern Bon Mots*, but I felt my face get hot and the best I could do was, "Shut your pie hole, bitch."

Silence stretched like a rubber band to the snapping point. And then one of the writers Felicity had taken up drunkenly yelled, "Woo hoo, attaboy." He did a kind of goofy end zone dance until one of my security guys took his elbow and led him out. Who knows what kind of drug he was on. She was more upset by his betrayal than what I said. She always wore Kevlar when it came to comments from yours truly.

I woke when Quick farted. It was early afternoon and the smell of cat was in the air. I got up and the fox jerked awake. He saw me testing the air and put his own nose to work.

"Spotted cat," he said.

"What's that?"

"Trouble."

"Is there anything here that isn't?"

"It must have seen the birds."

He jumped up on the wall. "There she is."

It was a huge cat, with eye teeth like tusks, ambling slowly toward the headless body. It had the heavy, unhurried shamble of a creature that fears nothing. Its tan hide had dark blotches like a leopard's spots, only bigger.

"It looks like something from one of those Lost Island movies," I said.

Quick shot me a look, but I didn't feeling like explaining.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"Do?" Quick said. "Go!"

He trotted off and I caught up, carrying the leather bag in my teeth. "Where are we going?"

He gave me a sour grin. "Not in such a hurry to get to them mountains now?"

He had that right; but scary as they were, I still felt their pull. It was as if they called to me, weird as that sounds. Not an actual voice, but something that reached me at some deep level.

"One part of me feels like I belong there, but another says I don't," I said.

"Listen to the one that says you don't."

If not to the mountains, where should I be going?

After thinking about this, I asked, "Where do the Two Legs live?"

"A long ways from here," Quick answered.

"What direction?"

Quick jerked his muzzle westward.

"I guess that's where I better go." But I felt a stab of anxiety and looked back toward the mountains. They wanted me.

We headed through more countryside laid waste long ago. Orchards had gone wild, stone farmhouses were roofless, and the bones of abandoned wagons with broken wheels stood outside. Now and then a little village looked like it had been ground under a giant heel.

"Lots of chickens and geese were here at one time, or so the stories go," Quick said. "No one's belly hurt from hunger then."

A cold wind began to blow from the mountains, and dark storm clouds rushed overhead like they were in a hurry to get somewhere. Birds dropped from the turbulent sky and roosted in tossing trees.

Quick and I padded along. "Don't usually get a wind like that until later," he said. "It belongs to the time of cold and snow."

We kept moving until sundown. We passed nervous deer peering from thickets and beavers on log dams uneasily facing the wind. “They don’t know what to make of it neither,” said Quick.

We felt drops of rain. “That’ll turn into snow,” Quick said.

“What do we do then?”

“Look for a place to hole up.”

The rain turned to sleet and then snow began falling, lightly at first, then heavier. Quick’s head turned side to side as he looked for shelter.

We found a small cave dug into a small hill. A squirrel, too stupid to get out of the weather, chattered insults from a tree. “Smells like badger in there,” Quick said. “But it’s old smell.” There were a few bones here and there and clumps of rabbit fur. Quick touched the bones with his nose. “Not worth bothering with.”

The storm rose in fury but it was cozy enough in the darkness. Quick recalled past meals, his favorite conversation, then after a while curled up for sleep. It was long past midnight when I heard a sound outside.

“Badger,” Quick warned. “Don’t let him get inside.”

I moved up to the entrance just in time to bump noses. He was as surprised as I was.

“Who’s that?” he snarled. “This hole’s mine.”

He tried to force his way in and we fought, our teeth clashing.

“Don’t let him get under you,” Quick barked. “You’re finished if he does.”

Belly-ripping was his style and he twisted to get beneath. I stayed low and after a minute he backed off.

“How’d you like that?” Quick barked from behind me. “There’s plenty more if you want it.”

“Is that a fox yapping down there?” the badger said,

“Come and find out,” Quick yipped

“Pretty brave with your wolf friend in front, aren’t you?”

“He’s not a wolf.”

“What’re you doing in my hole?”

“We’ll go when the storm is over,” I said.

“What am I supposed to do, freeze out here?”

Quick held his tongue and I didn’t think “yes” was the right thing to say under the circumstances, so we all listened to the wind whistle and moan.

“Can’t see your nose in front of your face,” the badger complained; an edge of desperation in his growl. “I’ve never seen a storm so early.”

The cold was seeping into the ground and the cave was getting on the cool side despite our body heat. I could imagine what it was like outside.

“You can come in if you promise no trouble,” I said.

Quick yapped hysterically. “You can’t trust a badger.”

There was a suspicious silence outside. Finally, he said, “All right.”

I backed up and he shuffled in, covered with snow. “Brrrrrr. Be a lot of critters die in this storm. Nobody’s ready for it,” he grumbled. “Bears look ahead more’n most and they just started fattenin’ up.”

Now that he was inside, butter wouldn’t melt in Quick’s mouth. “They’re not good times,” he whined.

“And getting worse,” the badger said.’’ You hear things.’’

It didn’t sound like he was going to say more, so I asked, “What things?”

“Bad things. Mogwert’re ready to move again.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re stronger than before. I wouldn’t want to be a Two Legs.” He muttered for a while.

Badgers are solitary creatures and mostly talk to themselves.

“Problem is,” he said to Quick and me, “the Two Legs are the only ones that’ll stand up to ‘em. They’re cleverer than Mogwert in some ways. But it won’t do any good this time if you believe what you hear.”

“From who?” I asked.

“Cleanup birds, snakes. That sort.”

“You can’t trust them,” Quick said. “They’re liars.”

“Not to each other they’re not, not about Mogwert. I get around; I hear them talking. Cleanup birds see a big feast coming. Snakes—well, snakes have always been friendly with Mogwert, and do what they’re told.”

“What do they want?” I asked.

“Want?” The badger snorted. “What they’ve always wanted, for everyone to be slaves. Because of Two Legs they haven’t had their way, but now the talk is they’re real cocky. They’re waiting for one last thing to happen.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“Someone sly and slippery to guide them.” He grumbled to himself for a bit and then began to snore. Quick whimpered and yipped in his sleep. I listened to the blizzard outside.

I wondered if Mogwert have been waiting for me. Sly isn't exactly a compliment and slippery is worse. But maybe the badger just meant smart.

## CHAPTER THREE

We dug ourselves out of the badger hole the next morning; three feet of powder, great if you were at a luxury ski resort. My unplugged memory reminded me I was fond of winterscapes, but usually on the other side of a double-glazed window with a blaze crackling on this side and a hot drink by my elbow, something with a generous lacing of brandy from the middle of the last century. We spend a couple weeks every January in Gstaad, where I keep a suite in the best hotel. Nobody runs hotels better than the Swiss; the best of everything, from tiptoeing servants to the chocolate on the pillows. We entertain various strains of Eurotrash there, the lesser royalty, the decayed aristocracy—all of them on the look out for money to marry into. Or anyhow Felicity entertains them.

“Why do you bother coming at all? All you do is stare at people in that sarcastic way you have,” she asked one night as she removed her jewelry. We had returned from a party for a Polish count. He could trace hemophilia in his family back five generations to a king I never heard of.

“Do you ever listen to these people?” I answered. “They don’t talk about anything that matters.”

“Nothing matters to you unless it has a dollar sign in front of it.”