

Outside Jackson, Wyoming

This was the house that would change their fortunes. They could feel it. Cole had barely steered his pickup off the highway and passed through an open cattle-gate before they began climbing the dusty canyon road north, and they could feel it-money-like a vibration in the crisp mountain air. It was humming out there, an expectancy, a promise, and they were driving toward it, cotton-mouthed, skin crawling. They could practically see it on the wind pushing the late-summer leaves, swaying the yellowing meadow grasses, smiling down upon the dappled river water below. The whole world here looked like money. Money just waiting to be plucked up off the ground-the leaves like greenbacks, the shimmer of the water like silver coins.

They needed this house, this break; they needed this work. Work for what sounded like as much as a year, maybe more. And not the thankless, backbreaking tedium they'd been reduced to for the past few years either. No, this was something to build a reputation on, a name, something to stake a man for decades. The kind of signature house a person could point to and proudly say, I built that-me. I built that. The kind of house that, thirty years from now, when they were all broken-down old men, they could travel to with their grandchildren and be welcomed, like masters of some dying art.

Bart rode in the passenger seat, blinking down at the chasm that had now fallen away just an arm's length from the gravel road. Not even a mile off the highway and already the country was wild, wild, wild. Below the road snaked a river raging white and blue, cataracts tumbling, and above them, off the low mountainsides, wispy waterfalls spilled down like great lengths of silver-white hair.

A prominent dip of chew bumped out Bart's lower lip, and by and by he spit into an empty Coca-Cola can. "I lived here almost twenty years, and I ain't ever been down this road," he said, peering over at Cole, who took the gravel track with white-knuckled respect. A blown-out tire wouldn't just be a pain in the ass out here; it would put them behind schedule for their noon meeting with the homeowner. "You ever been back here, Cole?"

Cole shook his head no, fixing Bart with a meaningful look for as long as he dared before turning back to the road ahead of them. This is big, pristine, private country, the look communicated. You and me, we don't just get invited back here.

"She told me she had a driveway punched in last summer," Cole said. "Another two miles or so off this road." He pointed an index finger up into the mountains. "Somewhere up in there, I'm guessing."

"You imagine the kind of bread they're spending?" Teddy put in from the backseat of the extended cab. "I mean, a two-mile driveway? Up here? That's an Army Corps-type operation."

"All that goddamn California money's, what it is," said Bart. "Hell, that state's filling up. Cheaper for them to come out here and plop a house down on a mountaintop than it is to buy a nice two-bedroom in San Diego or Los Angeles. Cheaper to build a house in the clouds. Lunacy, you ask me."

It had been an unseasonably warm spring and summer in western Wyoming, and now the mountain air was as sweet with sage, the late August sky overhead deliriously blue and gauzed in cottony clouds. In the backseat Teddy studied a gazetteer, biting his lower lip and running his fingers over the map. Bart hung an arm out the passenger-side window as the truck began to pull away from the canyonside. Soon they passed through a glade of trees and he reached out for the branch of a lodge pine, managing to snap off a handful of needles. Now the cab of the truck was filled with that smell, comingling with his Copenhagen chew-pine and mint and tobacco.

All three men were dressed just a bit more presentably than usual-unstained, newish Carhartt pants, plaid short-sleeve shirts with collars, scuffed work boots buffed up near to a shine. Cole glanced at himself in the rearview, tamping down his brown crew cut with his fingers and studying his newly shaved face-the razor burn beneath his jaw, his recently whitened teeth. Bart went to work with his pocketknife, cleaning beneath his fingernails, while Teddy sighed deeply and drummed his hands against his thighs.

Buzzed down practically to his scalp, Teddy's blond hair betrayed a constellation of blotchy pink-purple birthmarks that Bart occasionally pointed to as proof positive he'd been born with a host of defects-a subpar IQ, a troublingly true moral compass, and a peculiarly deep pride in his

wife of twenty years and the four young daughters they had brought into the world. Teddy was Mormon; Bart had once played drums in a death-metal band named Bloody Show. They loved each other like brothers; had ever since their childhood growing up together with Cole in the red-rock, box canyon country of eastern Utah, and then, later, as adults, moving out to Jackson Hole and this mountainous country, first as ski bums chasing near-endless winters of deep powder, tourist girls, and the intoxication of brushing shoulders with celebrities at the town's bars and cafŽs, and then later still, as men wanting to prove themselves in that same environment, tired of being seen as just townies, the blank-faced ski-lift operators you forgot as soon as you were swept away and up the mountain, the compliant bartender perfectly willing to suffer yet another drunken insult if it meant a ten-dollar tip.

Which was why, a few years back, the three men formed True Triangle Construction, an honest-to-god LLC with business cards, letterhead-the whole nine yards. They bought three matching Ford F-150 pickup trucks, fixing a stenciled triangle on the middle of both doors, and for the first time in their lives felt perhaps what their own fathers had felt: purposeful. Yes, they would build houses and condos for the rich vacationers and tourists, sure, but more than that, they'd be building their own company, a legacy, something to leave behind when they could no longer swing a hammer or crawl onto another 11/12 pitched roof. Hell, by then, they'd have a suite of offices, a secretary or three, business lunches downtown, big cowboy hats, and the lean, sun-browned visage of the kind of old men you'd see about town, that particular style and gravitas endemic to old American men of the Rocky Mountains-stern, sinewy, taciturn. Solid as Sears, as their fathers once said.

Bumping upward along that gravel road, Cole pictured himself far off and into the future: Friday night at a comfortably appointed restaurant, the bloody remnants of a prime rib and baked potato on a plate, his elegantly aged wife across the table from him, a cup of strong black coffee, a forkful of chocolaty dessert, and then, that relaxation that passes over a contented man able to pay for his meal from a wad of pocket-cash before pushing back from a white-linen tabletop to work a toothpick at the ivories of his teeth.

"If we get this projec . . ." Bart began.

"When we get this project," Cole said, pointing a finger into Bart's biceps. "When, amigo. We need to believe we were destined to build this house. That it's been, you know, waiting for us, up there in those mountains. Just waiting for our hands. These fucking hands. We need to believe that."

Teddy leaned forward from the backseat until his face was framed by the jostling shoulders of his two friends. A former high school all-conference cornerback, he was susceptible to Hallmark greeting cards, impassioned locker-room speeches, populist politics, and the every whim of his four girls, most recently ballet lessons and a pair of Shetland ponies he and his wife could not quite actually afford.

"I mean, can you imagine the size of our fee for a project like this?" Cole nearly shouted. "And if we muscle down and don't farm out a bunch of the work? Shit, man. This is it. This is our launching pad. This is where True Triangle Construction takes off. You can see it, can't you? Building houses for rich actors and CEOs. It all starts right here." He slapped the steering wheel for effect.

Cole had no problem imagining it. He had been imagining it, ever since the homeowner called him a week earlier, out of the blue. The truth was, he hadn't slept much since, each night doubting himself, doubting his own capabilities; frankly, doubting Teddy and Bart. What business did they have, really? Building some multimillion-dollar house? For the past three years they'd been just scratching by, renovating apartments, ski rentals, the occasional commercial project; a shitload of drywalling, roofing, and siding work; and then the odd new construction here and there—a handful of duplexes and a retail strip mall—Jesus Christ, how were they possibly prepared for this?

But he'd met the homeowner just the same, in downtown Jackson, at some place called the Persephone Bakery. The baristas were cute if waifish little things, the bakery cases full of extravagant-looking pastries, the coffee strong and expensive, and he waited for her outside on a small porch with two fancy outdoor propane heaters challenging the morning chill.

Having worked in construction ever since graduating high school, Cole knew enough to be suspicious of this homeowner—as the customer was always, always referred to: the homeowner—before even meeting her. For starters, why had she selected True Triangle when there were so many better-established builders in the area? For two: He'd worked on dozens of new home constructions in his time doing this, and while it was more common than not for a woman to take charge of the details of a home (selecting tile, say, or cabinet pulls, light fixtures, paint colors—that kind of thing), Cole hadn't heard this homeowner once mention a husband. Look, he didn't fancy himself a Neanderthal or what not; maybe she was a lesbian—great. But she hadn't alluded to that either. Her voice on the phone was just incredibly composed and businesslike, with none of the small talk other homeowners inevitably engaged in to butter up a contractor. They'd just agreed to meet at the bakery, and there she was, clutching a crisp paper cup of five-dollar coffee in one hand as she extended the other to him. Her grip was strong.

"Good morning, Mr. McCourt. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

His voice caught-she was one of the most attractive women he'd ever met. He could not have said whether she was forty or sixty years old, but she carried herself with a patrician assurance that only compounded his confusion as to, well, why he was the one she'd asked to meet her here. Her hair was long and chestnut red, streaked flinty gray in places; her eyes an arresting gold-on-green. He steadied himself as he sipped his coffee, briefly looking down at the table. In the treetops overhead, birds went on chirping, while out on the sidewalk, great wealth sashayed past in expensive duds looking extremely refreshed, unhurried, on its way to the next recreational diversion. Focus now, Cole thought.

"Oh, no," he said, forcing himself to meet her eyes, "not long, not long at all." For this woman, he thought, he would wait days.

She smiled, a bit wistfully, he thought.

"How many years have you been in business, Mr. McCourt? I must say, I looked for your website, but . . ."

"Well, around here, Miss-

"Gretchen, please."

"Right. Gretchen. Well, around here, so much of it's just . . . word of mouth, you know? You do good work, people find you. So, in the three-plus years since we started True Triangle, we haven't really needed none of that marketing stuff."

"Still, you may want to consider branding yourself a bit more, lest a potential customer suppose all you aspire to is, well, framing and drywalling."

Branding? he thought. He'd worked on his uncle's ranch as a teenager, branding and castrating cattle; the sizzle and smell of burnt hair and flesh was nothing he wanted a part of again, least of all his own person.

"Or maybe that is all you're interested in, and I'm wasting your time."

He gathered himself anew. "Gretchen, all I can tell you is this: My partners and I have been working construction in and around these parts for about twenty years now. We don't have any fancy offices, and we don't live on big ranches or take our vacations down in Turks and Caicos, or anywhere like that. We're just three hardworking guys, and if you do decide to hire us, I promise we'll do right by you, ma'am. I'll give you my word on that."

She sipped her coffee. Cole was aware that beneath the table she was crossing her legs. He studied her face, realizing that the dark bronze freckles arrayed across her nose and cheeks were something he dearly wanted to touch; he imagined himself in bed beside her, in the morning, her earlobe in his mouth, her scent exotic tea and expensive perfume, or perhaps horses and honey, or just cold mountain air.

Cole and his wife were in the midst of a decidedly conclusive separation, and close, he knew, to officially divorcing. His life had taken on a wobbly quality. Cristina seemed to be living with her new guy, their once shared apartment now sitting largely vacant. He'd begun boxing up some of his possessions in a half-assed sort of way, willfully disbelieving that their separation was actually permanent. He'd been less than forthcoming with his partners about what was going on, though in the back of his mind was the dread that the most sensible thing for him to do was to move in with Bart, a surefire sign that his life was in retrograde.

"You do give the impression of a man who is trustworthy," Gretchen said, blowing lightly on her coffee.

Trustworthy? He sure as hell was. Wasn't him stepping out of a seven-year marriage. Though, sitting here, so close to Gretchen they might have been lovers out for their morning coffee, he did allow himself a moment to ponder what that might feel like-stepping out.

"I appreciate that," he said.

"And discretion is certainly something I'd value, were I to choose your firm to construct my home."

His firm. He briefly imagined the scope of the project. Imagined that website she had just mentioned-the one he hadn't even thought to commission-and photographs of this house, in that style of glitzy, dream-home pornography where every image seems dipped in some kind of golden dew. And perhaps, in just a few photos, Gretchen standing beside him-the builder-on a panoramic porch, or leaning against a monolithic kitchen island, clutching mugs of chamomile. Let his future ex-wife ruminate on that. . . .