

star of the north

The only guilty man in the Montana State Prison squatted down and grabbed a handful of bone-dry earth when he heard the question. He'd anticipated it when the new meat's face registered recognition of him. Even so, he always found himself at a loss to give an answer that he knew by heart. The years had gone by, and people's fascination had moved on to other things, but still the question returned, again and again. The last time he'd heard it had to have been two years back, on the twentieth anniversary of the thing. A reporter had asked him then, just as another reporter asked five years before that, and five years before that, and five years before that. In a few more years, he figured, another reporter would realize that the story hadn't been told in a while and would show up to ask the question again. And the only guilty man in the Montana State Prison would think about it some before answering, as he was doing with the punk standing over him now.

"I don't regret what I did," he said, standing and facing his questioner, a boy of around eighteen, about the age his own son might be if he'd managed to stay outside the walls long enough to father one. He hardened his gaze, precluding sentimentality. He'd learned long ago that looking like he'd take no shit went a long way toward keeping it away. For all other occasions, he had other ways of staying safe. He wasn't yet

certain if he'd have to employ them with this guy.

"Oh, man, Ray Bingham, I didn't believe it was really you," the young guy said. "I heard about that all the time when I was a little kid. Everybody in Billings knows about that—hell, probably everybody in the whole damned state. My pops, he said he was there and saw the whole thing. He said it was a real bloodbath."

A nice story, it was one Ray doubted. Over the years, it seemed as though everybody who was in Billings on September 16, 1988, eventually claimed to have seen what Ray did, but his own recollection was that Jeff Fielding had been well on his way to dead before anybody showed up behind Rimrock Mall and tried to stop it. Still, Ray saw little upside in contradicting the young man. Instead, he pressed on, giving the guy what he'd come to hear.

"I saw Jeff Fielding on the sidewalk back there, and I wrestled him to the ground," Ray said. This part he recited by heart, a word-perfect rendition of what he had first told the cops and later the judge and jury twenty-two years earlier and, these days, the occasional interloping reporter.

"I held his shoulders with my knees and I punched him in the face. I punched him again and again, until I felt his bones breaking. I caved in his eye sockets. I smashed his nose until it looked like a purple piece of tenderized meat. I hit him, and I didn't stop hitting him when his blood sprayed across my face. I hit him until they pulled me off. And by then, there was no reason to hit him anymore."

When Ray finished talking, his chest rolled like a wave at sea. He remembered feeling a similar breathlessness after he'd been yanked off dead Jeff Fielding. That day, he sat on his knees and clasped his hands behind his back so the cops didn't have to do anything but slap on the cuffs. Now, he looked back at his young questioner, who hadn't yet lifted his eyes from his shoes.

"Jesus Christ," the young guy said.

After lights-out, Ray kept his eyes open and chewed on the question of regret. To his recollection, Judge Mabry had been the first to ask about it, at the sentencing. The old jurist had spent much of the trial either polishing his glasses or idly spinning them by the temples. But at the final hearing, Mabry had pulled the glasses on and peered over them at Ray and asked if he wished to acknowledge the pain of Jeff's family, if he had come to terms with the horrible thing he had done.

“Hell, no, I don’t regret a thing,” Ray had said. “Jeff deserved what he got, and I gave it to him. That’s about the size of it.”

“Young man,” Judge Mabry had answered, “you will find prison a cold and lonely place with that approach.”

In the intervening years, Ray had come to agree with Mabry about cold and lonely, but he didn’t figure it had anything to do with his attitude. That’s just the way prison was, for everyone.

Ray flopped over onto his left side, facing the wall, and doubled up his pillow.

I’ll never see a day outside this place, he thought. I know that now. But if the price of being free is remorse about something I’m glad I did, something I’d do a hundred times out of a hundred if given another chance at it, I’d rather stay here.

Ray slipped down off the top bunk at first light and stretched. He could feel the years piling on, and he’d taken to silent calisthenics each morning to stay limber. On the outside, he figured, people assimilated time’s erosion of their youth bit by bit, day by day, never really grasping what was happening to them. Inside, it was different. Mirrors were polished steel, and the face that gazed back at him blurred, offering little detail. The previous December, he’d received a Christmas card from his mom and Rick, a picture of the three of them together in the visitation room, and Ray had been flabbergasted at the gray weaving through his thinning hair, the creases in his face, the crinkling at the corner of his eyes. Almost immediately, he realized that he shouldn’t have been surprised. He could see the years chewing on his mom and Rick on their once-a-year visits. Why wouldn’t they chew on him, too?

At forty-three years old, Ray had spent more time in prison than out. Out there, in the world, he might be considered a relatively young man. In here, age accelerated as the years passed and new generations arrived, riding the bus.

“What’s your name?” Ray sat next to the young man in the dining hall, and every eye in the place followed him. It would mean something to the guys in stir, Ray’s sitting and talking with this new kid. Ray had respect in the pen, as much respect as one could get from a pack of thieves, rapists and murderers, and he’d had to do ugly things to get it. He was inclined to be generous with the kid, who had shown some respect—and some balls—by approaching him the way he did.

Maybe Ray could save him some trouble by befriending him. He had the latitude to be magnanimous. If the kid crossed him, he could take everything away, and the young guy would find out about the cold and lonely Judge Mabry spoke of.

“Jack,” the kid said. “Jackson Reed. My friends call me Jack.”

Ray scooped some hash browns between his thumb and forefinger and shoved them in his mouth. “What are you in for, Jack? I know you didn’t do it, but what did they say you did?”

“Oh, I did it. Second-degree murder. Guy tried to screw me on a deal. He had a knife. I had a Glock.”

Jack jabbed at his scrambled eggs with the plastic fork, breaking them into segregated chunks of overcooked whites and yellows.

“How old are you?” Ray asked.

“Nineteen.”

“Any people back home?”

“Mom and pops. My girlfriend. My daughter. She’s eighteen months old. They say she could be in high school before I’m out of here.” The kid’s voice wavered.

“Best not to think of the day you get out,” Ray said. “Makes it too hard to handle the days that you’re in, you know what I mean?”

Ray was nineteen the day he moved out of the house. He’d come back to Billings after a year of working down in Kit Carson, Colorado, doing cathodic work on the oil wells for his Uncle Bob. For a year solid, he put away nearly every buck he earned. On the job, Bob picked up the cost of lodging and meals, meaning Ray had only to resist the siren song of the pool hall and bars to keep from blowing his stash. He spent that year reading a lot—Kerouac and Mailer and Bukowski, paperbacks he found in the general store—and screwing the pretty waitress at the Wagon Wheel. Amber was her name. She was twenty-four, a few years older than Ray, and she had shown him a few things. When he up and left in September, she had seemed surprised that he didn’t ask her to come with him. Instead, he ran away with Caroline, the ’64 skylight-blue Mustang he had bought at a lot in Arvada.

In Billings, he had asked his mom if he could move back into his old room, just for a couple of weeks until he found a job and a place. His brother, Ben, cleared out a couple of dresser drawers and made room for Ray. His mom had seemed pleased to have him back, and Rick had tolerated him, which was about the most Ray could expect. Still, it

was just too uncomfortable, being there again, all of them—mom, Rick, Ben, and his fourteen-year-old sister, Kim—awkwardly trying to talk with him over dinner. Six days after Ray had moved in, he found a job at the sugar beet plant and moved right back out, this time into a one-bedroom place downtown. Everybody seemed relieved to see him go.

Ray and Jack worked side by side in the metal shop, punching signposts in the benders. Acutely aware of the watchful stares of the guards— inmates and steel could be a dangerous combination—the men stuck to their tasks and spoke in sideways mumbles.

Everybody in maximum had seen the bloom on their friendship, and the bulls who had taken a liking to Jack when he came off the bus kept a seething distance out of deference to Ray, and they even wondered if maybe he was grooming the youngster for himself. Ray couldn't bring himself to feel fatherly toward his young counterpart—to admit such a thing would be a concession that time was winning—but he felt something akin to being an older brother. Jack despaired of the sentence he was facing and still grappled with the crushing realization of what he'd brought on himself, but Ray knew that soon enough, time wouldn't be such a hurdle for him. At least Jack would get out, if he kept his nose clean.

“What did you do when you were on the outside?” Jack asked him.

Ray laid his weight into the bender bar. “You know the sugar beet factory on the South Side?”

“Yeah.”

“I ran the boiler there. Grew those sugar crystals.”

“You could take the smell? Man, I hate it when that place fires up.”

“After a while, sure. I came to enjoy it, actually. It smelled like cash money.” He smiled. “What about you? What sort of work were you into?”

“Some welding, construction. I didn't really have a career.”

Ray mopped his brow with the back of his hand and wiped it on his pants leg. “I wouldn't call what I did a career. I know more about this we're doing here than I ever knew about sugar beets. It was just a way to pay the bills and keep Caroline in high-test. It drove my mom's husband crazy. He always told me I had a good head but no ambition. Shit, maybe he was right. Look where I am.”

Jack laughed, and a guard ambled over and tapped the machinery with his baton. The men set back to work.

During a break, they leaned against the wall in the yard. They were

pecker-deep into November, and the wind bit through their work shirts and into the flesh underneath.

“Can I ask you something?” Jack said.

“Shoot.”

“One thing about ... well, what happened that day. I never heard anybody say why you killed that guy.”

A half-smile crossed Ray’s face. The reporters who tromped into Deer Lodge on five-year cycles always asked this one, too, and he never gave them the satisfaction of a decent answer. “I never told anybody. I admitted it, didn’t try to hide behind any bullshit excuse my lawyer tried to think up, and it made everybody a little nuts that I never said anything,” Ray said.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because it made no difference. I did what I had to do, and nothing was going to bring him back.”

“Why did you have to do it?”

Ray kicked the dirt and sent a spray of pebbles flying.

“Look, I’ll say this: Jeff Fielding was a bad guy. That whole family was real bad news, man. I’d known him for a long time. He used to live a couple of doors down from us back in the seventies, and that place his family lived in was out of control from the get-go, man. I never saw his mom or dad around. Just Jeff, his brother Benji and an older sister, Tonya. Jeff was five or six years older than me, and Benji was a couple years older than him. As bad as Jeff was, Benji was ten times worse. By the time they moved into our neighborhood, that guy had been in and out of this place a couple of times. Sleeved-out in prison tats, which was a pretty amazing thing to see back then. I was plenty scared of him.”

“Bad guy, how?”

Ray flashed on a memory he had replayed a thousand times, in the years before he beat the life out of Jeff Fielding and in the many days since. “Jeff took a neighbor girl, a little seven-year-old who lived across the street, into his house and undressed her. He was fourteen, maybe fifteen. He didn’t, you know, violate her or anything, but he beat her up pretty good. He bit her nose, if you can believe that shit.”

“Jesus, man.”

“I was the one who found her. He’d kicked her out of the house, bloody, no clothes, middle of winter. She was hiding behind our shed, afraid to go home and say anything.” The memory landed on Ray, a punch across the years, the shivering girl begging him not to tell any-

body, her nostril shredded, the blood dotting the snow she stood in. Ray coaxed her into the house, and his mom wrapped her in a blanket. And then all hell rained down.

“Yeah. Anyway, when people found out, everybody went a little nuts about it. My stepdad, the girl’s father and some of the other men in the neighborhood went over there and talked to Jeff’s parents. Threatened them, if you want to know the truth. The cops showed up. A day or two later, they were all gone. Cleared out, moved across town. I’d see Jeff from time to time here or there, and he’d try to bait me into something, just because he was that kind of asshole, and maybe he knew I had something to do with how he was found out. Anyway, I just steered clear, you know? He was trouble.”

“Wait, so it was about what happened to this girl?” Jack said.

Ray shook his head. “No, but he was probably lucky that somebody else didn’t get to him first.”

Ray lay awake again that night, replaying for the first time in many months those last few days of freedom.

Everything had started while he waited for Caroline at the detailing shop as she got one last bit of primping before the snow flew. Ray thumbed through a news magazine, sitting up and taking notice only when he came to a piece about homesteading in Alaska. The practice, which had pretty much gone by the wayside in most of America by the sixties, was still getting play up north, although not too successfully, according to the article. But if someone were willing to bust ass in the unforgiving outdoors, in a place where there were no decent roads or supermarkets, the article said, there was land to be had.

The plans were already churning in Ray’s head.

“You’re going to do what?” Rick Duley asked his stepson later that week. “Alaska? This sounds like a flight of fancy to me.”

Ray was none too surprised by his stepfather’s skepticism, so he turned to his mother.

“You’re just going to up and leave?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’ll have to sell Caroline”—he shocked even himself by saying such a thing, and yet he also knew that his willingness proved his resolve—“and get everything squared away. But, yeah, I’ve got a line on a pipeline job up on the North Slope, and once I’ve been there for a year, I can put in for a homestead.”

Rick shook his head. “Honestly, Ray, I just don’t think you have much appreciation for what you’re getting into here. This sounds like another one of those things where you go off half-cocked, and in a few months, we’ll end up sending you airfare so you can come home.”

Ray folded his arms across his chest. It wouldn’t be right to say he hated his mother’s husband, but he didn’t respect the man. Rick spent his life with his head jammed up the ass of academia. He didn’t—couldn’t—understand what somebody like Ray wanted from life.

“Look, man, I’m not asking for permission. I’m asking if I can stay here for a few days before I go.”

Rick looked at his wife, who would be making the call. She always did.

“Of course, dear,” she said. “There’s always room for you here.”

In the week that followed, Ray sold everything he owned save for his clothes. He found a good home for Caroline, only after exacting a promise that if the guy—a well-heeled baby boomer who lived on the West End—ever decided to sell her that Ray could have first dibs. The cash from that deal put him at about ten thousand bucks, which he figured would get him where he was headed and give him a decent stake.

On the eve of Ray’s departure, he sat in the kitchen taking sips off a can of Pabst when Ben came in.

“Jesus,” Ray said, scrambling to his feet. “What the hell happened?”

A purple welt ballooned around the boy’s left eye. The skin looked sickly and thin, as if it might burst and spill blood and pus on the linoleum. Under the eye, a deep cut had split open.

“Me and my friends were just horsing around in a parking lot,” Ben said. “I slipped and hit the bumper of a car.”

“Come on. How stupid do you think I am?”

“It’s true.”

Ray palmed the top of Ben’s head like a basketball, turning it so he could get a better look. Seeing the boy battered like that turned Ray’s stomach. Given the difference in their ages, he didn’t have much in common with Ben, but he loved the boy and thought he was just about sweetest kid he’d ever been around. His mind flashed on memory just a few years old, when the family had made a pilgrimage down to South Padre Island for a vacation. On the way, they’d stopped to visit Uncle Bob in Casper. Bob was the opposite of warm and kindly, even to kin, and yet Ray remembered that while everybody else had said their goodbyes by shaking Bob’s hand, Ben had walked through

the handshake and given the bear of a man a hug that had surprised everybody, most of all Bob.

“Who did this to you, Ben?”

“Nobody.”

“Bullshit. Tell me.”

The boy hung his head. “Jeff Fielding.”

Jesus. Jeff Fielding had to be twenty-five, twenty-six years old. Ray was surprised that Ben even knew who he was. The boy had been only four or five when the Fieldings got run off.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he say anything, or did he just beat the shit out of you?”

Ben wouldn’t look at him. “He said you’re a pussy.”

“Where was this?”

“At the mall.”

Ray fetched a steak from the freezer and told the boy to put it on his eye and keep it there. “When mom and Rick get home, just tell them you got in a fight,” he told Ben. “Don’t say anything about anything. I’ll be back.”

On his way out the door for the last time, Ray grabbed the keys to his mother’s Monte Carlo.

Ray and Jack loped around the prison yard, jawboning, same as they did damn near every day.

“You asked me a while ago about why I did it,” Ray said, flinging a pebble across the splotchy ground.

Jack waited. He dared not speak. If Ray had any hesitation about talking, Jack didn’t want to provide an excuse to clam up.

“I never told anybody this, but Jeff, he beat the shit out of my little brother that day. A little kid, ten, twelve years younger than him, and he just brutalized him, busted up his face and his eye.”

“Jesus,” Jack said. “Why?”

“He was a goddamned animal, that’s why. You meet guys like that in here, guys who don’t have any honor or soul at all. They’d cut you to ribbons as sure as they’d look at you. Nothing there.”

“Wow. So you just went after him—”

“—and found him and made certain he’d never do anything like that again, to anybody,” Ray said. “Christ, it feels ... damn, it feels like confession to say it to somebody. You know, I was a day away from

leaving Billings for good. I was gonna go up to Alaska, make some bucks there on the pipeline, build me a little place in the woods and read and chop wood, live off the fatta the land, like in the book. Be alone. That's all I ever wanted to do. I was so close. Another day, and I was gone."

Jack tried to lick the words he wanted to say, the solace he wanted to offer, off his tongue. Ray kept going. "And I guess I'm gone anyway. The day I met you, you asked if I have regrets. Not about Jeff, I don't. If you'd seen what he did to that little kid, you'd have wanted to kill him, too. But I am sorry I never saw Alaska. I've been there a million times in my head, and then I always wake up here, you know?"

"That's rough."

"I'll tell you something else, Jack, and it's something I've never told anybody," Ray said. "I know in my heart I did the right thing. My conscience is clear. But here's the part that gives me a little trouble sometimes: when I felt Jeff's bones breaking in his face and saw everything caving in and knew he was gonna die, I liked it. It felt ... God, it felt like the best drug I ever took."

"I don't know how you do it," Jack said. "All I think about is the time I have left until I can get out of here. You don't seem bothered by it."

Ray looked skyward for several seconds. Jack picked at his fingernails and waited.

"Well, here's the thing. I know I did what I did for the right reason. The time in here is hard for everybody. If you think I'm not bothered, it's only because I've had more practice faking it. But I rid the world of a worthless son of a bitch. I can sleep at night."

The year turned and pushed through spring to the precipice of summer. Ray persuaded Jack to pursue his general equivalency diploma, telling him that as far away as it seemed, he should be thinking about giving himself the best possible chance once he got out. They shot the bull in the prison yard. They did their part in keeping the state's roadside signage up to snuff.

On the solstice, Ray received a postcard.

"Jesus," he said, turning it over and reading it again.

"What?" Jack said.

"My brother. He's coming to see me."

"No kidding."

Ray tucked the card into his waistband. "I haven't seen Ben since I was sentenced."

“Are you shitting me?”

“Damn near twenty-three years. I’ve seen pictures. He drops me a Christmas card every few years, depending on how things are going for him. But I haven’t looked in his face since I went away.”

“Why?”

Ray’s heart beat fast. “He’s ashamed, I guess. Of me, probably. Of being the reason, indirectly, that I’m here, maybe.”

He sat down. Jack followed him.

“What are you going to say?”

Ray considered the question a while. “I just don’t know. Hello, I guess.”

Ben had known trouble. Ray gathered that much just from the occasional visits from his mom and Rick. They usually brought pictures, gurgling happily about Kim and her perfect family, replaying in excruciating detail all their university junkets around the world. London. Bordeaux. Athens. Ray always found it curious that they seemed not to grasp how tales of living without a tether could taunt a man who needed permission to take a piss. The joy of seeing his mother made the discomfort worth enduring. Rick was a simple matter of toleration, the same as marking time inside the prison walls. Ray had done it for years. An afternoon was nothing.

In the pen, a man notices details; he has all the time in the world to do so. Ray learned as much about Ben from what his mom and Rick didn’t say as from what they did. The little boy had grown into a man, and Ray had some concept of the burden he labored under. Ray had done what he could to lighten the load, but he couldn’t do it all.

He had seen it so many times in other men inside, the way entire branches of their family trees withered and died once they went to prison. For every dedicated mother, wife or girlfriend who arrived on visitation day without fail, a score of brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins excised the inmate from their lives, the way a surgeon might cut out a mole. It was as if they didn’t care, or didn’t think their disappearance would be noticed.

The man on the inside always notices. He has nothing else to do.

On visitation day, Ray looked deep into the murky image he projected onto polished steel, patting down the incorrigible shocks of hair that kept trying to bolt away from his head. He brushed his teeth twice. He’d

bartered for some cheap cologne out in the yard, and he doused himself in it. He chuckled gently at the vanity, and then he redefined it. This was more anticipation than anything else. His palms repeatedly grew sweaty, and he wiped them down on the ass of his cotton pants.

When Ben came into the waiting area, Ray pegged him immediately. The cherubic face held its ground, even as the rounded corners of the obese man his brother had grown into threatened to swallow it up. Ray stood and rubbed his hands on his hips and tossed a smile to his kid brother, who walked toward him with a small woman a half-step behind.

“Jesus, Ben, look at you,” Ray said, breaking into a wide smile and walking a few steps toward his brother.

Ben met Ray’s outstretched hand and shook it vigorously. “Ray, so good to see you. You look ... well, you look pretty much the same. A little less hair.”

“But more than you,” Ray said, pointing at the hairline that had beaten a hasty retreat to the back of Ben’s head.

Ben pawed the skin up top. “Yeah, well. ... Darn, Ray, I’m sorry. This here is my wife, Kara,” he said, ushering the woman forward.

Her eyes, small and intense and unblinking, set Ray ill at ease, so he looked at Ben while shaking hands with her. “Wife? I had no idea, man. Congratulations.”

“Just a matter of waiting for the right one,” Ben said. “Kara has been a godsend to me. I mean that literally.”

“Well, sit down here and tell me all about it,” Ray said. “Damn, it’s good to see you, man.”

Ben clasped his hands, lacing his fingers, and set his chin on them. “Ray, did you ever wonder why I never came around here to see you?”

“Sure. It didn’t surprise me. I’d have liked to have seen you, but it’s a tough deal, how all that went down.”

“Ray, I’m thirty-five years old, and in many ways, I feel like I’m just trying to live. I’m fourteen months sober after being a drunk for nearly twenty years. I’ve been in bankruptcy twice. I’ve been homeless, Ray. When you killed Jeff Fielding, you did a number on me, too. I don’t blame you, Ray, but that’s the truth.”

Ben’s continual invoking of his name agitated Ray, and he wasn’t sure he liked the direction his kid brother was aiming things. He swallowed the urge to protest and waited for what Ben might say next.

“Kara has brought me to God, Ray. I was powerless before, but now God is with me, and I can do things I never thought possible. I can stay sober. I can be a husband. If it is his will, I will be a father. And God has also shown me that I must forgive you for what your vicious act did to me.”

“Damn generous of you and God,” Ray said, “considering—”

“Let him finish,” Kara interrupted. “This is hard for him.”

Ray drummed his fingertips on the table and looked at his brother, who gobbled some air and started in again.

“Here’s what I’ve come to find out, Ray. I forgive you. But the burden on me will not be lifted until you forgive me, too. Will you, Ray? Will you forgive me for what I’ve done to you?”

“Ben, I don’t follow you.”

Ben grabbed his wife’s hand, and she squeezed his fingers tight. “When I came home that day, I told you I’d fallen against a car bumper. Do you remember that?”

Ray searched the man’s corpulent face and found the trace of a scar under his eye. “Yeah, I do.”

“You didn’t believe me.”

“Nope.”

“Ray, it was the God’s honest truth.”

The room went hazy on Ray, and he flattened his palms on the table as Ben bore in.

“I’d seen Jeff Fielding that day at the mall, that much is true, and he’d taunted me some and called you names, and he told me to tell you that he would be coming for you when he had a chance. When you asked me who did it, I blurted out his name. I figured the worst that would happen is you’d beat him up, or he’d beat you up. But you killed him, Ray. Good God Almighty. You killed him.”

Ben dropped his head to the table and sobbed. Kara draped herself over him and consoled him, whispering in his ear. Ray held on as the room threatened to spin again.

“I couldn’t say anything, Ray. I couldn’t,” Ben said. His voice became shrill, small. “I was a little boy. I didn’t even know where to start. Please forgive me, Ray, please, please forgive me.”

Ray stood up, and the blood assaulted his temples. He intertwined his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. “I forgive you, Ben.”

The younger man’s whimpering morphed into full-on blubbering. “Thank you. Thank you.” Tears streamed down his face. “Thank you

for giving me my life back. I feel like I can finally live now.”

Ray turned and walked away.

That afternoon, Ray sat apart from everyone in the prison yard, his back to the milling crowd of cons. Jack approached his friend slowly.

“The days are growing shorter now,” Ray said, startling Jack as he came near. “Up in Alaska, on the North Slope, it’s still almost twenty-four hours of daylight, but every day, they lose a little more sun. In six months, they’ll be in a long stretch of twenty-four hours of dark-ness, but the days will be growing a little longer. It comes and it goes.”

Jack sat down next to him.

“I’d be in my twenty-third year of that cycle. Twenty-three years! I bet I’d have never grown tired of it.”

“I bet not,” Jack said.

They sat quietly a while longer. Jack swept dust off his chest. Ray stared straight ahead, rigid.

“Jack, I want you to listen to me. Listen, and accept it, and don’t say a word. Do you understand?”

Jack swallowed hard. “Whatever you say, Ray.”

“Things are different for me now. I can’t help you through your time in here. You did what you did, and you have to live with it on your own. I want you to stand up and walk away from me. I don’t want you to speak to me ever again. I want you to act like you’ve never known me. Just leave. I like you, Jack, but I can’t be your friend, and I can’t carry you anymore.”

“Carry me? What the fuck are you—”

Ray turned, and Jack saw steel in the older man’s eyes that stopped him cold.

“Jack, if you say another word, I will cut your heart straight out of your chest.”

The young man stood and stepped backward, slowly. Ray turned his eyes back to that faraway place. Jack headed for the other side of the yard, looking back once to see if his friend would look at him, but it was no use.

For the rest of the afternoon, Ray Bingham’s eyes saw only the northern horizon that he had once come so close to catching.