

Praise for *The Last Track*

"If you like thrillers set in the great outdoors, Sam Hilliard's *The Last Track* might light your campfire . . . Brody's search takes us deep into the Montana woods, which the author describes in such beautiful detail that we can almost smell the pines. Hints about Brody's own tragic background ratchet up the tension, which spikes further when his own son is threatened . . . Brody is such a riveting character that he could easily anchor an entire series."

—*Mystery Scene Magazine*

"*The Last Track* is an exciting adventure and mystery, highly recommended."

—*The Midwest Book Review*

". . . tightly scripted, fast paced . . . with enough technical insights and plot twists to please the most ardent and critical fans of this genre. Mike Brody is an enigmatic character well worth following on future tracks!"

—Wayne E. Martin, RCMP Superintendent, (Retired 2009)

"From the very start *The Last Track* captivates with a frenetic pace, keeping the reader engaged . . . (and) guessing right up until the very last page . . . the ending was a delightful surprise; one that most certainly lends itself to a sequel."

—Cyndy Otty, www.goodreads.com

"My only problem . . . I have to wait for the next one to be published."

—April Hanson, www.Shelfari.com

"I wholeheartedly recommend this book to any and all who love suspense novels with a bit of the unusual and a lot of tension combined."

—Susan Petrone, books.Google.com

"Hilliard has an ability to keep you guessing throughout, not knowing who you can trust as a reader, always keeping the pages turning."

—Jack Sheard, www.WhatABook.wordpress.com

"Brings to mind the works of James Patterson and Patricia Cornwell. The story draws you in and keeps your attention through the twists and turns as you try to figure out who is behind the events taking place."

—Gina Reba, www.LibraryThing.com and
www.InsatiableReaders.blogspot.com

"The end of this one came together nicely. I was satisfied that this story was closed out, while leaving room for future books"

—Kristina Guidroz, www.TheCajunBookLady.com

“. . . very well written and held my interest throughout the entire book . . . I was sad when it was over. I wanted to keep reading.”

—Krista Bradford, www.Amazon.com

“I would recommend *The Last Track* to anyone who has some time to spare because you aren’t going to want to put it down!”

—Teresa Krueger, www.TerasasReadingCorner.blogspot.com

“Debut author Sam Hilliard has created an immensely likable reluctant hero in Mike Brody, and he’s only scratched the surface of the character’s potential.”

—Elizabeth A. White, www.SavannahNow.com
and www.ElizabethAWhite.com

“. . . flows well and offers up just enough plot twists to delight any mystery thriller fan.”

—Jennifer Higgins, www.Rundpinne.com

“Hilliard’s style reminds me a bit of James Patterson, both intriguing and creative.”

—Amanda Goossen, www.LitFestMagazine.com

“Gripping mystery with a paranormal twist.”

—E.J. Stevens, author of *From the Shadows*

“. . . starts off with a bang and never lets up.”

—Crystal Fulcher, www.MyReadingRoom-Crystal.blogspot.com

“Mystery buffs will especially appreciate the detailed tracking and unexpected surprises.”

—Martha Eskuchen, www.MarthasBookshelf.blogspot.com

“Mike Brody is a man’s man . . . an exciting adventure thriller . . . a must read.”

—Michael Harrison, www.Amazon.com

“. . . just enough detail about the art of tracking to keep my interest without making the author look like a know-it-all.”

—Judy Dudley, www.SeizetheBookBlog.blogspot.com

The Last Track

The Last Track

A Mike Brody Novel

by

Sam Hilliard

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For my Mother
and her new birthday,
February 11, 2009

Day One



07:14:32 AM

Sean Jackson counted to four and exhaled. Deep in flight mode, his heart pounded furiously. One thought drove him: he had to make it to the Pine Woods Ranch without being seen.

Because he had been spotted on the main road earlier, he needed an alternate course. Eight miles in the opposite direction was a gas station near the highway on-ramp. Inside were a phone and an attendant. But Sean figured that eight miles could take an hour, which made the filling station hardly an option at all. The ranch, however, was less than a mile out. Even if someone was waiting at the gates for him, heading toward lots of people was much safer than banking on a solitary clerk. And once he explained to his parents what had happened, everything would be fine. They would understand.

Until then, the fewer chances he might be spotted, the better. Facing west, twin mountain caps caught his attention. Their shape was familiar. For the last six days, each time he had seen them from the ranch, he had wished he was back in Brooklyn.

Sean pushed his glasses back up along the bridge of his nose. Usually when he shifted them around, his fingers smudged the lenses. This time they stayed clean.

Committing to his course, he tore through the trees, one eye on the mountains. He stuck tight against the tree line, away from the road. A voice deep inside said not to run full out yet, to save the reserves until he drew closer.

Minutes passed. His inhaler rattled in his pocket. Sean thought he would be near the gates by now. Questioning his chosen route, he hesitated. He stared up at the towering Douglas firs; the pines were so much taller than the maples in Grove Park. Everything about Montana seemed larger.

He glanced behind, mentally retracing his path to this point. In his mind's eye he had moved just as he had planned. He ran again. Swung left, gunned for the road, and burrowed deeper into the woods. But something had gone wrong. He was not where he had expected to be.

2 The Last Track

Five more minutes elapsed.

Every direction he turned, every step he took, only led to more trees.

07:14:32 PM

Mike Brody inhaled. He was tired from the drive to Montana, too tired for the red and blue lights flashing on the row of police cars. Past the lights and vehicles, a sawhorse blocked the entrance to the Pine Woods Ranch. After a sixteen-hour road trip, this was the last straw. For the sake of his son napping in the back and his ex-wife riding in the passenger seat, Mike checked his displeasure. He kept quiet and rolled up slowly.

An officer with a clipboard hailed them. Since Mike's ex-wife had made the arrangements, the reservations were in her name. The number of people in the truck matched the number of guests listed under Jessica Barrett: three. Jessica, like many women, had never changed her name when she married.

Satisfied there was nothing to worry about, the officer removed the sawhorses and let the truck pass. As they started through the gate, the officer's eyes locked on Mike Brody's side of the truck.

"S&B Outfitters," the officer said, reading the decal on the side of the truck out loud. "You're Mike Brody?" Mike nodded. Facing away from them, the officer called to a plainclothes officer in khakis. "Lisbeth! It's him."

Jessica sighed, leaning toward the driver's-side window.

With a face that put strangers at ease, people often thought they had met Mike Brody before. A feature last month in *News Story* made his face even more recognizable.

"Fantastic. Just who I was looking for." The plainclothes officer offered Mike a card: Lisbeth McCarthy, Detective. She had shoulder-length black hair and the look of someone not afraid to get dirty.

Lisbeth said, "After you check in, let's talk."

"What's this about?" Jessica asked before Mike could. There was just enough tension in her voice for Mike to notice, yet not enough to put off a stranger.

“I just have a few questions for Mike,” Lisbeth said. “My cell number is on the back.”

The tires scattered dust and stones on the dirt road as he drove away. Mike knew what Jessica was thinking. Was he planning to meet Lisbeth or not? Right now all he cared about was the deadline for check-in, and after that, taking a hot shower. Sixteen hours split across two days was half a lifetime road-tripping with an ex-wife and an eight-year-old.

“Are you going to speak with her?” Jessica asked.

Mike answered by glancing back in the rearview mirror at their son.

At the main lodge, an error in the computer system had morphed their reservation for two rooms with two doubles into a single room with two twins. The mistake—the attendant apologized repeatedly for it—was unfortunate. But because of overbooking, a proper resolution had to wait until the morning. The attendant promised to bring a cot to their room. An hour later, it still hadn’t arrived.

On the plus side, the accommodations matched the description in the ads. The lodge itself was a massive ranch-style building. Thick, exposed wood beams supported a vaulted ceiling, giving the rooms a log-cabin feel. Hand-carved furniture—oversized, as if scaled for giants—lined the walls. A bearskin rug covered the floor between the beds. A generous window directly opposite the door offered a stunning view of the landscape, which included a snow-tipped mountain range.

The idea for the trip started right before Mike and Jessica had separated. Both had agreed this was a vacation they wanted. Even as the marriage dissolved, each detail of the trip fell into place effortlessly, as if the vacation was immune to their marital problems. While many things had changed with the divorce—longstanding rituals terminated, assets redistributed—part of their relationship survived. When it came to their son, they avoided conflict and agreed on what made sense for him. So they had kept their promise to Andy and each other. Now they were in Montana at a dude ranch for a week, under the big sky, a twenty-five minute drive from any decent-sized city.

4 The Last Track

A gray-and-white striped cat slept on a couch near the main entrance of the building. Once they unpacked and settled in, Andy stepped into the lobby to pet it, leaving his parents alone for a moment. The door remained open so they could see him.

“I really like the looks of this place,” Jessica said. And then she added more quietly, “Sorry about my tone with Lisbeth before. These obstacles at the last minute get me.”

“You and me both,” Mike said.

Seated at the edge of the bed, Jessica flipped through pamphlets about the ranch. “There’s an article here,” she said. “I can see it. Twenty-first century meets cowboy. Wireless Internet access, and lunch from a cast-iron pot over a fire. Modern luxuries and nature’s wonders. The best of both worlds.” She jotted the last bit in her planner. Anything important to her found its way to the pages, sooner or later. “And I can’t wait to ride the horses.”

When Andy returned, Mike showered. The hot water relaxed his muscles. Lisbeth’s invitation wandered into his thoughts. *After you check in, let’s talk*, Lisbeth had said. He had checked in. That left the conversation.

After he dressed, he said, “Think I’ll go find out about that cot.”

“Is that your cover?” Her question sounded nothing like a question at all. Jessica was good at making questions sound like statements, and statements like questions. The mark of a journalist.

“It’s better than sleeping on a hardwood floor,” said Mike.

“This missing cot is a bit convenient,” said Jessica. She had Mike’s number. She always had Mike’s number.

Relenting, he said, “I may pop by and chat with Lisbeth.”

“Please stay out of this one,” Jessica said. “Not for me. For Andy. We’re on vacation.”

“It’ll be fine.” He stood in the doorway. “They just want to talk.”

“Mike, this is not the first time it’s started like this . . .”

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Finding the check-in area closed, Mike left the Navajo artifacts and moose head hanging from the stone walls and headed for

the main gate. Cool air nipped at his bare arms. Sunset was near. *Only doing this as a courtesy*, he thought. *Besides, Jessica wants the inside story*. He almost laughed aloud at his rationalization. As he reached the front gate, Lisbeth waved him toward her.

“Up for walking a bit?” Lisbeth said. “I move around when I’m problem solving. Helps me think.”

“What problems might those be?” Mike said.

“My vacation is coming up. I was thinking about taking an excursion. Figure I have you here, an established sports outfitter, might as well ask a few questions.”

Mike played along because he had few questions of his own for her. Although he didn’t buy her ruse, sloughing off a potential client out of pride—or other reasons of ego—was risky. He wanted his business to thrive, not go bankrupt. “I can always spare a few minutes,” he said.

They headed away from the ranch along a dirt road, with Lisbeth dictating the brisk pace. “A long drive for you,” Lisbeth said. “You’ve got California tags. Where do you live?”

“Maddox. Northeast of San Francisco. My son is very excited about this trip.”

“My dad sure wouldn’t have made a drive like that when I was Andy’s age. You’re a good man, Mike. What do you think about this place?”

“It seems like a lot of fun. Can’t wait to learn how to be a ‘dude.’ Andy can’t wait either.”

“The ranch has always enjoyed an excellent reputation.” She paused. “So, S&B Outfitters—the decal on your truck—how long have you been leading tours?”

When asked about his business, he kept the answers short. To Mike, the less market speak, the better. He considered beating his own drum to be arrogant, but, like any small-business owner, sometimes he had to. “Seven years. My partner and I run tours to different countries. Each package is a little different. We go where no one else does. Take the clients just a little bit farther out than the competition would, without pushing them beyond their physical abilities. We cater to the middle-aged man looking to prove he’s still

6 The Last Track

got what it takes, and the adventure photographer. All are welcome, however.”

“You lead the tours personally?” Lisbeth asked, as if the prospect intrigued her.

“The ones that interest me,” Mike said. “I scout out every package beforehand and coordinate safe passage with the local officials. Don’t want my customers stumbling into the middle of a coup.”

“You mentioned a partner.”

Mike nodded. “Erin Sykes. She’s the S in S&B Outfitters. Much better with details than I am.” A vast understatement. Bookings always increased when he was out of the office. He preferred deals that sold themselves with minimal involvement from him, while Erin worked hard at closing sales.

“You chase the rush and she pays the bills.” Lisbeth’s lips pursed as if she had uncovered a mystery. “From the sounds of it, your offerings may be a bit too strenuous for me. I’m interested though. Do you have anything for novices? A little less active?”

“If you’re looking to sit in a tour bus and gawk at scenery,” Mike said, “an S&B Outfitter package is not for you.”

“Point taken,” Lisbeth said. They reached a fork in the road. The sun had started to set; the trees cast longer shadows. “If you don’t mind my saying so, you’re not what I expected from the article in *News Story*.”

“Wondered how you recognized me.” Despite occasional press attention, Mike never considered himself a celebrity. He worked for a living.

“I won’t lie,” she said. “I’m definitely curious because of the article. You found Senator Hexler’s son when no one else could.”

“That was a massive search team. I was a tiny part of it.” Mike cleared his throat uncomfortably. For Mike, where he had been, what he had seen—was history. He worked hard to keep his past in the past. He did not discuss old cases. Doing so felt like exploitation. “Part of me thinks that story should never have been published.” Because of the article, the matter of Bret Hexler’s son was his most notorious case.

“Really? Then why did you agree to it?”

“Jessica, my ex-wife, sold the pitch to them, and told me about it after they had accepted it. She had tried breaking into that magazine for a long time.”

Regrets aside, he seldom refused Jessica when it came to her career. He felt he owed her that much for the sacrifices she had made for him.

“Blame vanity on the ex, do you?” Lisbeth chuckled. “To be frank, if they wanted to write about me, I wouldn’t pass on the chance.”

“Might want to be careful who you say that to, Lisbeth. Someday it might come true.”

“I’m a gambler but that’s a long-odds bet if there ever was one. Here’s a bet for you. Six to one you were in the military.”

That tidbit wasn’t mentioned in the article. “It was a long time ago,” he conceded. At thirty-four, his early twenties seemed very distant indeed. He rubbed the half-day stubble on his right cheek.

“It’s in your stance,” she answered as if the question were asked. “The squareness of your shoulders. Once it’s drilled in, life never really smooths it out. That’s where you learned to track?”

“Not exactly,” Mike said, omitting that when he left the service, he had sworn off tracking for many years.

“Don’t like questions about the service, huh? I can imagine there are all kinds of interesting applications for the discipline there. What’s it called when you can move around without leaving any traces?”

“That depends on who you ask.” Mike had to admit, there was a directness about Lisbeth that appealed to his sensibilities.

“I’ve heard you can place your hand into a print and see the missing person,” Lisbeth said. “Is that true?”

“In some cases,” Mike said.

“How does that work?”

“People leave more behind than just marks in the dirt,” Mike said. “The tracks capture emotional energy as well.”

“So why did you get into the business of finding missing people?”

8 The Last Track

“Let’s be clear about one thing,” he said, stopping and looking at Lisbeth, “tracking is not a business to me. I don’t charge money for it; I don’t teach it; I don’t sell it, or anything to do with it; and unless asked, I don’t talk about it much. Tracking is something I do. Every once in a while, a call for help comes. Sometimes I can lend a hand.” And sometimes . . . it ended differently. He resumed walking again.

“Why do you do it?” Lisbeth pressed, almost repeating herself in spite of his clear message about not wanting to get into it.

Briefly the memory of a desolate field near a supermarket played in his mind. Just a flicker, the images lasted long enough for him to become aware of them. Then he returned to the moment. He wanted to know why Lisbeth really summoned him, but waited. He could hold on a little longer.

“I have my reasons,” Mike said.

“Humility. I like that.” Her tone packed more sincerity than flattery. “Any idea about what’s going on out here tonight?”

“Been wondering about that for the last ten minutes,” Mike admitted.

She pressed ahead as if he hadn’t responded. “How about the radio? Heard anything through any media channels?”

Mike noticed that Lisbeth closely watched his physical reactions to her questions, instead of focusing on the answers. Interrogation savvy. Skills like that came with experience, not from training exercises or a book.

“No,” Mike said. “The only news blurb that comes to mind is the one about an abducted girl in Colorado. Caught an AMBER Alert about her on television at a truck stop.”

“I don’t believe we’re dealing with something quite like that,” Lisbeth said. “At least, I hope not.”

Although interested, Mike was still a bit guarded, considering the lack of details. He was trained to be cautious.

They reached a group of officers talking at a police line next to the road. “Dagget! My report? Wanted it ten minutes ago.” Lisbeth dispatched one of the cops, Dagget, who fidgeted. His face drew long as if he just had his last laugh for the year. “Get going,” she

added, quelling the leftover chatter. Another officer held up the tape for her and Mike to pass. Ducking beneath the yellow plastic strip, they stepped into the woods, among the pines. “Lucky for us, your name popped up on the guest list, so I asked around about you. Called a friend at the FBI. Ordered a background check, too. You’re certainly well regarded in the right circles.”

Even as Mike was about to thank her, he sensed a qualification poised on her lips. Lisbeth delivered. “Although, the state troopers in California think you’re a fraud.”

Far worse allegations had been leveled against Mike over the years. With nothing to prove or lose, words slid right off him. “And what do you think?”

Lisbeth stopped. “I want to show you something.” They stood at the threshold of a break in the woods. An empty clearing. The inner perimeter of the Douglas firs formed a broad semicircle.

“What are we looking at?” he asked with his right eyebrow raised.

“And here I was hoping you could tell me.” She grinned.

His face flushed, the color more disappointment than anger. *Maybe we’re not peers, but a trace of respect would be nice*, he thought. “Why does this all feel like a test?”

“Perhaps it is,” Lisbeth said.

Mike Brody was in no mood for such things, especially not after that road trip and the heat from Jessica waiting for him. He turned away from the clearing for a second.

“I should get back. This has been an extremely tiring day and my patience is shot. It was nice to meet you. Whatever it is you’re searching for, hope you find it.” He turned his back on her.

“Mr. Brody,” Lisbeth said bluntly.

He had almost decided that Jessica had been right, and he should stay out of this one. Not every situation was the right fit. Besides, it had been a long day and a half in the car. Maybe his judgment had declined along with his energy levels. Then, turning back, he noticed an unusual depression in the soil toward the center of the clearing. The track bothered him.

“Mr. Brody, don’t pretend you don’t want to know what this is

10 The Last Track

about. Or think for a second that I can't see that."

Looking up from the depression, he faced her again, finding her expression considerably less reserved.

"Let me walk you through some background and you can decide," Lisbeth said. "I got a call today about a possible missing child from the ranch. A fourteen-year-old boy with asthma, from Brooklyn. Only child."

"You want my help with the search?" Mike asked, talking to Lisbeth, his eyes on the clearing.

"I'd like you to take a look at what we have, and give me some scenarios," Lisbeth said. "Abduction, runaway . . . or something else. I want to cover every angle. We'll start here because an officer recovered some personal effects that the parents identified as Sean's. Part of a watchband."

"If I pick up a promising trail, do you want me to track it?"

"Just the scenarios for now." Lisbeth tilted her head to the left, put her hand on the nape of her neck, then smoothed back a few loose strands of hair. "Can I count on you?"

He looked past her, again focusing on the depression. *Something about the clearing looks wrong*, Mike thought. *Definitely need lights for this*. After their short discussion, he doubted what the tracks suggested. Still, there was little choice but to believe them. People lied. Tracks did not.

"Something the matter?" Lisbeth prompted him.

Answering after a long silence, Mike said what he suspected Lisbeth wanted to hear. "I'll be back in a few minutes with my equipment." Then he added, every single word clear and distinct, "We can discuss the murder then."

09:02:27 PM

After Mike Brody set up the portable lighting gear, he searched the scene. He took his time as Lisbeth watched from a spot outside the clearing, silent. In her right hand she held an envelope.

He respected that she avoided pressing too much for details deep in his past, especially subjects where he resisted discussion.

He disliked that she had consulted third parties before asking for his help. But at least she had owned the inquiries, a point in her favor as far as Mike was concerned. In part, her reluctance was understandable. He was an outsider in law-enforcement circles and likely always would be. In their world, he was an observer first, a participant second. He knew the score.

Once the sun set, the temperature dropped rapidly. Enveloped in the work, he ignored a chill in the air. Those few moments when he did notice, the sensation of being cold passed. Survival training taught that coldness was just a mental state, rather than a physical dilemma. Resisting the cold made one colder. Fighting the cold, like fighting pain, prolonged it.

A harvest moon rose. Wide canyons stretched across the surface of the distant sphere. The sky was clear, and packed with stars. The sort of night made for fires and ghost stories and cold beer.

Instead of roasting marshmallows, Mike lay flat on his stomach, staring at impressions in the dirt, rising and dropping again as necessary, depending on which track intrigued him. Points of special interest he tagged with markers, thin sticks with a reflective coating on the tips.

Thirty minutes later, he rose a last time, finished. A narrow strip of cartilage in his right knee cracked loud enough for Lisbeth to hear. He brushed the dirt off his long-sleeved shirt.

“Well, what are your thoughts?” asked Lisbeth, although Mike was still facing away from her. Other officers had gathered and formed a semicircle.

“I’ll give you my opinion,” Mike said, “but I want to hear a little bit about the murder first. The two are almost certainly connected.” Lisbeth was used to setting the agenda and it showed on her face. She hesitated.

“You know a lot more about this than you’re telling me,” Mike said. “You’d like to know more about the missing boy, and I’d like more details. Way I see it, we both get what we want. Some truth.”

At last Lisbeth budged. “We got a call this afternoon from a hunter on a cell phone. Guy’s shooting deer out of season. He’s wandering. Finds a body.”

12 The Last Track

“And murder doesn’t happen often around here?”

“We get more overdoses than anything else,” Lisbeth said. “This is a quiet town. So we check the hunter out. He doesn’t have any of the necessary permits and he’s completely out of line being here. This whole area is posted. To top it off—while he’s waiting, the hunter takes some pictures of the victim with his cell phone camera and e-mails them to my office.”

“That’s odd.” Such behavior disturbed Mike. Technology had purposes. E-mailing death pictures was a particularly questionable one. “And a bit twisted. He’s not involved?”

“Well, besides the basic reality that hanging around for the police after you report a murder you committed is pathological . . . none of the guns in his possession had been fired recently, and there was no powder on his hands. He’s sketchy but clean.” She continued. “Now flash ahead. First officer arrives on the scene. Questions the hunter, verifies there is a corpse, and cordons the area. Then he waits for my team with the suspect in his patrol car. Everything by the book.”

He glanced again at the soil in the clearing. In his survey, he had recognized more than the signs of a struggle. “Not everything by the book, though. I thought it was common practice to place markers that indicate the arrangement and position of a body.” He shook his head. “The only markers here are the ones I placed.”

“My team never had a chance to do that.” She spoke carefully, each word weighted. “The body is missing.” She cleared her throat in such a way that Mike knew she wasn’t going to say anything else about it. “Now, what can you tell me about the boy?”

Mike took a breath. “He’s a runner. Lanky. Got a real practiced stride, like a cross-country runner. He lands heel first, and rolls forward. Textbook form. And he’s scared. Real scared. Something spooked him big time. That piece of watchband you found is where he slammed his wrist into a tree as he fled.” Mike stood near the trunk, pointing at a narrow scrape mark. “Matches the edge of the link from the watchband. Also gives us an idea of his height, along with his stride.”

“Can you see anything else?”

Something about her inflection made it clear to Mike what she

was really pushing for: Lisbeth was looking for an indication he could see more than just the physical evidence. That he knew something about the missing boy that he should have no way of knowing. He hesitated. He usually did at these moments. Once he opened this door there was no going back—she would view him very differently.

Again he bent down, placed his hand in one of the tracks, and closed his eyes. For Mike Brody, the world stopped. Pictures of Sean dashing through the trees raced in his mind. Tapping into the emotional charge people left behind in their tracks was exhausting; he could only manage it for a few seconds at a time. So he let the stream of images continue as long as he needed them to and not a second longer.

When he rose to his feet he was breathing heavily.

“Sean wears glasses,” Mike said.

Her next statement told him he was correct. “How can you possibly know that?”

“It’s just what I see. What I see isn’t always complete.”

“That’s not something they teach in the military, is it?”

“The training helped.” He doubted she would believe him if he told her he had always seen things he couldn’t explain.

“Okay, then. So what do you think happened with the body?” asked Lisbeth. She removed a few photographs from the manila envelope and held the picture side toward her. She mentioned nothing about them.

“Any chance the first officer on the scene is here?” asked Mike.

“That would be me.” The answer came from Dagget, the same officer Lisbeth had scolded earlier. He wore a squared-off crew cut shaved down to the scalp on the sides: trooper style.

“Is this about where the body was?” Mike asked, pointing to a T-configuration he had marked toward the right half of the clearing.

Dagget shrugged. “It’s hard to be certain. The lighting is different now. Might have been.”

“Now, any chance he was on the short side, a little stocky? Probably had a paunch, over two hundred pounds. When you found him, he was face down on his stomach, head facing the left, cheek

14 The Last Track

in the dirt. He had a goatee or a beard. Long red hair, tied up in a ponytail. Right arm wedged under his chest, left arm out at his side.” Mike fired the details off like a grocery list, emotionless yet severe.

Dagget’s startled expression told Mike he was near the mark, far closer than the officer had expected. “Possibly. I really didn’t spend a lot of time with the corpse,” said Dagget.

Mike believed Dagget, though he doubted the sentiment was mutual.

“What else do you see, Mike?” asked Lisbeth. With an eye on Mike, she studied the photographs—the pictures from the hunter’s cell phone.

“The killer took the shell casings and left. Your corpse wasn’t dragged away by a mountain lion or coyotes. No traces of either animal here, no scat, no prints. It was moved by humans. Same ones who sprayed down all the blood with ammonia.”

“The killer came back afterward?” asked Lisbeth.

“Almost,” said Mike. “I believe two different people moved the body.”

“So one killed the man, the other moved . . .”

“No,” Mike said. “I mean two different people besides the killer, as in addition.”

“Three?” Her eyebrows shot up, and she shook her head in doubt.

“There are enough differences among the various tracks to indicate three different individuals. Your gunman, and then two more who moved the body shortly afterward.”

Lisbeth spoke. “Okay, we’ll keep that in mind. Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“Yes,” Mike said. “You suspect Dagget is involved somehow.”

Dagget grunted. “Who the hell does this guy think he is, accusing me?” Dagget said with a snarl. He spewed his petulance like an explosion.

“Mike,” Lisbeth spoke over Dagget. “Please finish.”

“Dagget is not one of the two men who moved the body,” Mike said.

The other police officers glanced at one another. Mike thought

that their expressions could have indicated anything. Maybe they disliked him. From a political standpoint, he probably said the wrong things. Mike would never know for certain. He could not. What he suspected: they planned to discuss the matter further and they wanted him gone.

He collected his lighting gear and excused himself.

“If you plan to leave the ranch,” Lisbeth said, “check with me first.”

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For Crotty, one of the big drawbacks of firearms was residue. Pulling the trigger was definitely easier than watching a life disappear at the other end—each time it took a little more gin afterward to bury that memory.

But firing a gun spewed black powder on everything. On the barrel, slide and trigger, inside the chamber, into the air and onto the shooter’s body and clothes—the umbrella of discharge covered a far larger area than simply the target. And a single granule bound the shooter to the crime. So dealing with that residue was a task no professional approached lightly. He tackled the problem with both calculation and experience. He never took shortcuts.

After carrying out David St. John’s grisly, yet unavoidable execution in the woods, Crotty drove home in his late-model gray sedan. Other than a squeak in the front disk brakes, the vehicle was unremarkable, forgotten by pedestrians and motorists alike in moments. Just as he intended.

The car reflected a deeper purpose. First, it was reliable. Modest, economical, and while not cheap, no enthusiast lusted for this ride. He rejected flashy cars because the Partner craved them so. The Partner wanted everything bigger, louder, greater than it was. Meanwhile, Crotty worked behind the scenes and got things done, however ugly. Things like David’s termination were certainly ugly. At least that part was over. Back at home, Crotty focused on the cleanup; it was better than thinking about what happened in the woods.

16 The Last Track

Stripping, he stood on the linoleum-tiled floor in the laundry room, and piled clothes on the machine. The windows were frosted, the flooring warm. He set the wash to extra hot, then dumped in a mixture of scented detergent and bleach. The dial crackled like the gears on a carnival ride. Letting the water rise halfway, he then arranged the clothes around the agitator evenly and shut the door.

After rinsing his hands and forearms three times in lemon juice, he slid on a pair of surgeon-grade latex gloves. While the laundry churned, he disassembled the Glock 17 on a pile of week-old newspapers spread across a card table. He cleaned the weapon with a bore cleaner and solvent, scrubbing the slide and chamber. With a dowel wrapped in emery cloth, he scraped inside the barrel, then dunked the metal cylinder in solvent. He allowed the cleaning solution to dry on the barrel. He wrapped it in plastic, ditched the gloves, and washed his hands in lemon juice again. His eyes returned to the Glock 17. He worked a different barrel into the frame, a well-used one that had seen a few thousand rounds at the firing range. For each gun in his collection, he kept a half dozen extra barrels around to frustrate ballistics analysis.

The science hinged on matching defects in the barrel with recovered bullets and shell casings from a crime scene. He always pocketed the casings, which left the barrel.

By creating his own set of defects, even if the barrel and the casings were recovered, the link between them was broken.

Crotty finished reassembling the weapon and felt an odd comfort following the sounds of the parts dropping into place. Loading a fresh magazine with a different brand of 9mm ammunition, he racked a round into the chamber. He dropped the magazine, added another 124-grain bullet, and jammed the fully loaded magazine back home. Seventeen, plus one in the pipe, made eighteen. Round numbers. The only way to carry.

He folded and bound the newspapers with twine for recycling.

The washer buzzed. Crotty ran the laundry again, this time heavier on the detergent than the bleach, and turned to matters of personal hygiene.

Steam from the shower fogged over the bathroom. A narrow

band of it vented through the open window. The sill was moldy from years of condensation.

He washed his entire body with lemon juice, including his hair, face, and neck. Then he scraped every inch with a pumice stone, soaped, and shampooed. The mixture of chemicals burned his already irritated skin.

After the shower he tossed the clothes in the dryer, dialing the temperature to maximum. He crimped the metal coupling on the exhaust valve, which forced more heat back into the machine.

The washer chugged one final round, loaded with bleach and warm water. He sprayed an aerosol-based agent on the card table, and laid out clean clothes on the bed.

His daily attire merged street clothes with business casual: blue jeans, polo shirt, black socks, boots with a shaft that covered the ankle, and a dive watch. Dressed, he slumped on the couch and watched the news for a half hour. There was no mention of David on the television, even on cable. Not entirely unexpected.

The dryer buzzed.

The second helping of bleach had etched white streaks into the fabric. The stains were acceptable. Crotty folded, smoothed, and formed tight corners. He placed the garments in a shopping bag with handles.

After dinner he ditched the evidence. Goodwill was the first stop. He stuffed the shopping bag in the donation container near the supermarket. The bound newspapers he tossed from the car onto a stranger's lawn for recycling. He wedged the barrel under the seat of a car scheduled for demolition at the local junkyard. Last, he tossed the two shell casings down two different sewer systems.

Back home Crotty paged through a file and nodded at his handiwork. All the wire-transfer records implicating his business partner fit in a small box. Reviewing them gave him pleasure so he did this twice weekly. He returned the records to their hiding place, and then wrote in his journal, making a few notes on how he wanted to grow the company. Crotty had big plans for growing the company, and the extra money expanding it would bring. He really needed the money. Well, his girlfriend wanted the money, anyway;

18 The Last Track

she made that point clear enough. He just wanted enough cash to get out of the business and go away with her. For now, he wrote.

His pen moved carefully across the page and formed orderly rows of tight neat letters.

The phone rang, interrupting his writing.

“It’s Joan Berman from the New Hope Orphanage. Just wanted to thank you for your most recent gift. The children are so excited about the new playground equipment. If you could just see the smiles on their little faces.”

“I’m sure it’s quite something.”

“And as you requested, all your contributions will remain completely confidential.”

“That’s fine,” Crotty said. “I’m really sorry to cut this short, Joan, but I had a rough day at work.”

“Of course,” Joan said. “Perhaps someday we can meet in person. It would be nice to put a face to the name on the check . . .”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. I’m really busy with my work.”

Crotty hung up and reflected on David’s murder that morning.

The timing was deliberate. He had long contemplated dismissing David—planning the execution carefully over many months, and settling on the exact place after great deliberation. David had become a liability. David had known too much about Crotty’s plans for too long. And if David leaked the details, the Partner would figure out what Crotty had been scheming. So he killed David. Crotty’s men had already moved the body to a safe place for disposal; nature would handle the rest. As it had with the others.

He anticipated the typical response when he would speak with the Partner: an interminably long conversation that had nothing to do with the situation and everything to do with the rift between them. Then once the bickering settled down, they would have to deal with the new threat.

The boy who saw too much.