

The
LAST
BURIAL
— *before* —
SPRING

I. K. MARLOW



The Last Burial Before Spring

A novel

I. K. Marlow

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Chapter 1: Mary Creek

Mary Creek stood at the edge of the mapped country, though no map ever gave it much importance.

On some charts it was no more than a black dot placed uncertainly beside a thin blue line. On others it was omitted altogether, as though the cartographer, having drawn the last known creek and the last known ridge, had lost heart and left the rest to God, wolves, and weather. Men who came north knew of it, however. They knew it as a place where flour might be bought at a wicked price, where a broken runner might be mended, where dogs could be traded, where whiskey could be had if one did not ask too publicly, and where a man could sleep one night under a roof before turning his face toward the empty country.

It was not yet a town. It had not the confidence of a town. No bell marked its hours, no boardwalk kept its citizens out of the mud in summer or the snow in winter, and no law book lay open in any public room. But neither was it merely a camp. Camps were thrown up by men who intended to leave. Mary Creek had begun to think of staying.

It lay in a shallow bend of frozen water, the creek itself running black and narrow beneath a skin of early ice. In spring, the creek muttered and chewed at its banks. In summer, mosquitoes rose from it in gray clouds. In autumn, it carried yellow leaves and dead grass southward. The water showed only in dark cracks where the current kept its small stubborn life. Everywhere else the creek lay white and hard, as if it too had given up speech until spring.

The settlement had been built along one side of it. There were perhaps a dozen cabins, though it depended on how generously one counted. Some leaned east, some west, one seemed held upright by the woodpile stacked against it, and all bore the look of having been built by men in haste and repaired by men in worse haste. Their roofs sagged beneath old snow. Their doors did not hang true. The chinking between the logs had dried, cracked, and been stuffed again with moss, cloth, mud, or anything else a man's hand could force into a gap against the wind.

At the center stood Harland's Trading House, larger than the cabins but no warmer in spirit. It had a false front nailed to it in a gesture toward civilization, though the boards had warped and pulled away until the place looked as if it

were baring its teeth. Above the door hung a sign painted in red letters that had long since faded toward brown:

HARLAND'S TRADING HOUSE
SUPPLIES, TOBACCO, FLOUR, COFFEE, TOOLS

There were other goods inside, not named on the sign. Men came out with bottles wrapped in sacking and did not speak of them. Men went in with furs and dust and came out with less than they had hoped for. Harland himself kept a thumb on the scale, but not so heavily that a man could prove it without starting a fight. He was a square-bodied fellow with small, wet eyes and a beard cut close under the jaw. He knew every man's debt, every man's weakness, and every rumor before it had cooled.

Behind the trading house stood the saw shed, where rough planks were cut when weather and strength allowed. Beside it was the blacksmith's place, a low building with a mud chimney and a roof patched with flattened tins. The smith was a Swede named Anders Lofgren, who spoke little and hammered much. His forge was the heart of Mary Creek in winter. Even men who had no business there found reasons to stand in the doorway, palms out to the red glow, saying nothing while iron softened and sparks leapt up like brief orange insects in the dark.

A little apart from the others stood the chapel.

It was the smallest building in Mary Creek, and somehow the most stubborn. The cross above its roof had been made from two pieces of spruce and lashed first with rawhide, then with wire after the rawhide rotted. Its door was painted blue, though most of the color had surrendered to frost and wind. Inside were six benches, a narrow altar, a black stove, and a shelf of books that had come north by steamer, wagon, sled, and accident. The chapel smelled of cold ashes, candle grease, damp wool, and old prayers.

Father Nicholas kept it.

He was not a large man. The North had a way of making most men seem smaller than they had been elsewhere, but Father Nicholas had never depended on size. He was spare and dark-haired, with a face made grave by listening. He had come to Mary Creek three years before, and in that time he had baptized two children, married five couples, buried thirty-three men, and failed to persuade the settlement to stop conducting business on Sundays. He had learned to chop his own wood, mend his own boots badly, and shoot well enough to frighten a ptarmigan though not always to kill it.

He had also learned that in the North, men did not come to God as they did in old countries. They came at odd hours, with frost in their beards, blood on their sleeves, or terror hidden under bluster. They came when a partner did not return, when a claim failed, when a child would not breathe, when the river took a sled, when hunger sat too close to the stove. They came not because

they were pious, but because the wilderness had pressed them flat and they wished to know whether anything stood above it.

Father Nicholas did not ask for more than that.

To the west of the chapel, on a low rise where the spruce thinned, was the cemetery. It had no fence. A fence had been spoken of, promised, begun, and abandoned when the ground froze too soon. The graves lay under snow, some marked by crosses, some by stones, some by nothing at all. Most were not Mary Creek men, if any man could truly be said to belong to Mary Creek. They were trappers, miners, hunters, carriers, and wanderers brought down from the north because their companions had still retained some idea of civilized burial.

A man might die a hundred miles beyond the last cabin, but if his companions had dogs enough, strength enough, or guilt enough, they brought him to Mary Creek. There Father Nicholas said words over him, and the frozen ground received him as best it could. Often the names were uncertain. Sometimes the dead man had used one name at one camp and another at the next. Sometimes his pockets gave no answer. Sometimes the men who brought him did not know him, except that he had shared their fire before he died.

So the cemetery grew.

Here lay Peter Lawson, if the knife found on him could be trusted. Here lay M. Doyle, first name unknown. Here lay three men under one cross because the spring flood had left them together and no one had the stomach to sort them. Here lay a man called French Louis, who was said by one man to be from Montreal and by another from Belgium and by a third from nowhere worth naming. And beneath many smooth places in the snow lay men with no crosses at all, only the silence that covered everything equally.

At the northern end of the settlement stood the biggest cabin in Mary Creek, and for that reason it was called the town office.

It belonged to John Walters, who was mayor because nobody else wanted the work and because his cabin had two rooms. The first room served as office, council chamber, records room, storehouse for confiscated goods, and court when court was required. The second was where Walters and his wife lived. Built against the rear wall, with its own mean little door and one high window too small for a man's shoulders, was the prison cell.

There was only one cell. Mary Creek had never imagined needing more.

Its walls were logs faced on the inside with planks and strapped with iron from old freight bands. The door was thick and ugly, hung on black hinges made by Anders Lofgren. The window had three bars. In summer it stank. In winter it froze. Men had slept off whiskey there, and one had spent two days in it after shooting another man's dog. No one had yet been kept there for murder.

John Walters hoped no one ever would be.

He was in his late fifties, though the North had used him hard enough to make the number uncertain. His shoulders had rounded, his beard had thinned, and his eyes had the watery patience of a man who had spent much of his life waiting for trouble to pass him by. Trouble seldom obliged him. It came to his door because he had the biggest cabin, because men called him mayor, because papers bearing his name lay in a tin box under his bed, and because someone, somewhere, had once decided that Mary Creek required authority.

Walters did not enjoy authority. He liked order, but disliked the acts necessary to keep it. He preferred disputes to settle themselves, debts to be paid without asking, drunks to fall asleep before breaking glass, and violent men to leave before becoming his concern. When pressed, he could speak firmly enough. But after speaking firmly, he often looked around as if hoping another man had said the words.

His wife, Mrs. Abigail Walters, had no such defect.

She was a narrow woman with iron-gray hair and a mouth that had forgotten softness. She kept the cabin cleaner than conditions allowed and considered most of Mary Creek an insult delivered personally to herself. She had married Walters in a warmer country and had never forgiven him for bringing her north, though she had proved better suited to the place than he. She feared neither cold, debt, drunkards, nor public opinion. What John Walters decided in the front room, Abigail Walters often decided first in the back.

Men laughed about this when they were far enough from the mayor's cabin. They did not laugh in front of her.

It was said she had once faced down a trapper with a drawn knife by striking him across the face with a stove lid. Whether the story was true did not matter. It was useful, and so it lived.

Mary Creek needed such stories. It needed them because the settlement was always pretending to be stronger than it was.

It tried to be civilized. It had a mayor, a chapel, a trading house, a cemetery, a blacksmith, and a place to lock a man when he became too much like an animal. It had Sunday services, though attendance varied with weather and whiskey. It had posted prices, though those changed according to Harland's temper. It had rules against shooting within the settlement, except in cases of wolves, mad dogs, or arguments that had already gone too far. It had a ledger for births, marriages, deaths, claims, debts, and punishments, though the handwriting in it changed often and the truth in it was not guaranteed.

But beyond the last cabin, the pretense weakened.

The law of settled places had traveled north with paper and ink. The law of the unsettled country had been there long before, written in hunger, cold, distance, and the quickness of a hand near a weapon. Mary Creek lived

between the two. A man could be fined for stealing flour in the morning and vanish into timber by evening, where no warrant could follow him until spring. A killing might be murder if witnessed by five men near the trading house, and a misfortune if it happened beyond the ridge. A debt might be settled with coin, fur, labor, threat, or blood, depending on the season.

By mid-November, the season had begun to choose blood.

The first snows had fallen early. Not the deep snows, not yet. The true winter still waited in the north, gathering itself. There would come a time when the cold would cease being weather and become a power, when breath froze white in the beard, when axe heads stuck to bare hands, when dogs curled tight and men woke in the dark to feed the stove as if feeding a god. There would come a time when the creek would freeze so hard that sleds could run its length, and the timber would crack at night like rifles, and no man would go beyond the door without first measuring his chances of return.

But that time had not fully come.

In these middle days of November the cold was merely a warning. It lay in the mornings like blue smoke. It hardened the ruts and sealed the mud. It put a rim of frost on every bucket and a skin of ice inside cabins where the fire had burned low. The sun still rose, but without warmth. It crossed the sky briefly, pale and distant, and dropped behind the spruce before a man had done half of what needed doing.

Travelers still came through Mary Creek, though fewer each week. Men from the south arrived with new boots and loud voices, asking after gold creeks they had heard named in saloons hundreds of miles away. Trappers came in lean and silent, smelling of smoke and skins. Hunters brought meat when luck was good and lies when it was not. Freight men cursed their dogs, their loads, the prices at Harland's, and the country in general. Some stopped only long enough to buy cartridges and flour before going deeper north. Others delayed because the sight of those black woods beyond the creek had cooled their ambitions.

Every evening, Harland's Trading House filled with them. They stood near the stove, steaming in their wool and furs, while the wind worried at the walls. Talk moved from weather to trails, from trails to claims, from claims to old quarrels, from old quarrels to silence. Men glanced toward the door when it opened. In a place like Mary Creek, every arrival mattered. A stranger might bring news, disease, money, trouble, or all four.

Father Nicholas often passed the trading house at dusk on his way back from the cemetery or some cabin where he had gone to pray, advise, or listen. Through the yellow windows he saw the shapes of men leaning into heat and smoke. Their laughter came out muffled by the walls. Sometimes it sounded like mirth. More often it sounded like defiance.

He knew many of them by name. He knew others by the names they had chosen to give. He knew who owed money, who drank too much, who feared the winter, who had killed and not said so, who dreamed of going home, who had no home to dream of. Mary Creek had few secrets from him, though it had many sins.

That November, however, there was a feeling in the settlement he could not name.

It had begun with the cold, perhaps. Or with the early snow. Or with the way the dogs lifted their heads at night and stared northward, growling low in their throats. Men spoke of wolves coming down from the high country, of game moving strangely, of old trails vanishing under drift before their time. Anders Lofgren said the iron rang wrong under his hammer, though no one knew what that meant. Harland claimed it would be a hard winter and raised the price of flour by two cents a pound.

Mrs. Walters said it was nonsense. Winters were always hard, men were always fools, and dogs always heard things that were not there.

Still, she began keeping the lamp lit later.

On the ridge above the cemetery, the spruce stood black against a colorless sky. Beneath them the graves made low white humps, some with crosses leaning out of the snow, others smooth and blank. From that place one could see all of Mary Creek: the trading house with its smoking chimney, the saw shed, the blacksmith's red doorway, the cabins scattered like tired animals, the chapel with its blue door, the mayor's cabin standing largest and least at ease.

Beyond it all lay the creek, frozen and silent.

Beyond the creek lay the timber.

Beyond the timber lay country that had not been named except by men who died in it.

And then the settlement, which had so long pretended at civilization, would have to decide what law meant when the snow began to fall.

Chapter 2: Father Nicholas

Father Nicholas was forty-three years old, though Mary Creek had made him look nearer sixty.

The North did that to men. It drew the youth from their faces and left behind only what had weight. In Father Nicholas it had left a dark beard threaded with gray, deep-set eyes, and a grave expression that did not leave him even when he smiled. He was not a sorrowful man by nature, but he had listened to too much sorrow to appear otherwise.

He lived alone in a room built against the back of the chapel. It was scarcely larger than a storage shed. There was a narrow bed, a small iron stove, a table, two chairs, a shelf of books, a trunk, and a peg for his coat. In winter, frost made white feathers along the inside of the window. In summer, damp rose through the floorboards and swelled the wood. He kept the place clean, not because cleanliness was easy there, but because disorder seemed to him a kind of surrender.

His meals were plain. Beans, biscuit, tea, sometimes fish, sometimes a little meat when someone remembered the priest after a hunt. He chopped his own firewood when he could. When he could not, some boy or idle man did it under orders from the mayor's wife, though never without grumbling. Father Nicholas accepted help quietly. He disliked needing it.

His chapel brought in almost nothing.

A few coins appeared in the collection box after Sunday service. A miner once left a pouch of dust after surviving a fever. A trapper paid for a baptism with two fox skins, badly cured. But most men in Mary Creek came to Father Nicholas with empty hands. They brought grief, fear, guilt, and the smell of smoke in their clothes. They asked for prayers, blessings, burials, forgiveness, or simply a place where no one would ask them how much they owed.

He gave what he could.

For flour, lamp oil, candles, nails, and winter stores, Father Nicholas depended more than he liked on John Walters. The mayor saw that the chapel received what it needed to remain standing and that the priest did not starve when the snows closed the trails. Sometimes the supplies came from the town office. Sometimes they came from Harland's ledger and were later settled in ways Father Nicholas was not invited to examine.

This dependence troubled him.

He owed Walters his place in Mary Creek. It had been Walters who wrote south asking for a priest. Walters who offered the little chapel. Walters who argued that even rough men died better when someone could say proper words over them. Father Nicholas had no wish to be ungrateful. Yet a debt,

even a kindly one, was still a chain. He felt it whenever the mayor hesitated before some difficult matter and looked toward the chapel, hoping the priest would make peace where law was afraid to stand.

Father Nicholas did not despise Walters for this. Weakness was not rare in men. He had seen brave men fail, cruel men weep, generous men steal, and cowards perform acts of unexpected mercy. The soul, he had learned, was not a simple country.

Before Mary Creek, he had roamed the northern settlements for years. He had ridden riverboats, walked muddy portage trails, slept in mining camps, in roadhouses, in mission sheds, in cabins where the roof smoked and the walls froze. He had carried the sacraments in a leather case wrapped against damp. He had baptized children in tin basins and heard confessions behind woodpiles, beside sickbeds, and once under an overturned freight sled while a storm buried the dogs alive outside.

He had buried men everywhere.

In muskeg. In gravel. Under river stones. Beneath spruce roots. In ground so hard the grave had to be burned open with fire. He had buried men whose names he knew, men whose names he doubted, and men whose names had been lost before they died. He had buried the drowned, the frozen, the shot, the crushed, the starved, and the foolish. He had said the same words over men who deserved tenderness and men who had shown none.

That was duty.

Duty, to Father Nicholas, was not a noble feeling. It was not warmth in the heart or light from heaven. More often it was a thing done while tired, cold, afraid, and uncertain of its use. A man did not perform duty because it promised success. He performed it because the alternative made him less than a man.

In Mary Creek, he was the only person to whom men came when they wanted God's forgiveness.

They did not always use those words. Sometimes they came drunk and talked in circles. Sometimes they sat without removing their hats and stared at the stove until he understood that he was not to ask direct questions. Sometimes they laughed too loudly and said they had only stopped by for warmth. But sooner or later the thing came out. A stolen poke. A partner abandoned. A claim jumped. A woman wronged. A man struck once too often. A body left where it fell because the snow was coming and the living wished to go on living.

Father Nicholas listened.

He had long ago ceased being surprised by what men could do. But he had not ceased believing they might answer for it.

That belief was what kept him in Mary Creek.

Not comfort. There was little of that. Not respect. Men respected him in the uneven way they respected a loaded rifle, a winter trail, or a grave. Not happiness. Happiness was a summer word and did not often reach so far north.

He stayed because there had to be one door in Mary Creek that opened for the guilty as well as the grieving. One room where a man could speak the truth before it froze inside him. One pair of hands willing to close the eyes of the dead, even when the living had already turned away.

On the morning the stranger came to town, Father Nicholas was in the cemetery.

The snow was not deep yet, but it had covered the older graves and softened the rough places between them. He stood beside a new mound at the edge of the rise, his coat pulled tight around him, his beard silvered with frost from his own breath. The man beneath the mound had been brought in from the north two days before, wrapped in canvas and tied to a sled. No one had known his surname. No one had known whether he had believed in anything. Father Nicholas had buried him anyway.

He finished the prayer and remained there a moment longer.

Below him, Mary Creek lay in its shallow bend of frozen water. Smoke rose from Harland's Trading House. A hammer rang once from the blacksmith's shed and then fell silent. Dogs barked near the mayor's cabin. Beyond the last roof, the spruce stood thick and dark, and beyond the spruce the unmapped country waited.

Father Nicholas looked north.

For no reason he could name, he felt that something had begun moving there.

Not a storm. Not yet.

Something smaller than a storm, and worse because it had a human will behind it.

He crossed himself, closed his prayer book, and went down toward the chapel.

Chapter 3: The Stranger

The stranger came into Mary Creek on a Wednesday afternoon, when the day was already failing.

At that time of year afternoon was only a brief courtesy between morning and dark. The sun had not so much set as withdrawn, leaving behind a gray light without warmth. It lay over the settlement thinly, caught in the smoke from the chimneys and in the frost that gathered along the lower logs of the cabins. By four o'clock the creek had turned the color of iron, and the spruce beyond it had become a single black wall.

He came from the north.

That alone made men look twice.

Travelers still passed through Mary Creek in mid-November, but most of them came from the south with freight, news, or foolish hopes. Those who came from the north so late in the season usually came in parties, with dogs and sleds and the worn-out noise of men who had survived something together. This man came alone and on foot.

He was tall, though not heavily made, and moved with the careful economy of one who has learned that strength may be spent only once. His coat had been good once, but it was now patched in three places and burned along one sleeve. His boots were wrapped with strips of hide. A short beard covered his jaw and cheeks, and there was frost in it. His face was darkened by wind and cold, with the skin drawn tight over the bones. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. The North had rubbed the number away.

But it was his hands that men noticed.

They were bare when he first came in, for he had taken off one mitten to feel along the cabin walls as if testing whether the place was real. The backs of the hands were scarred white and brown, old marks crossing newer ones. Around the wrists were deeper scars, narrow and uneven, as though ropes had once bitten there and stayed too long.

He stopped first before the blacksmith's shed.

Anders Lofgren was inside, hammering a cracked sled shoe back into shape. The stranger stood in the doorway without speaking until the Swede looked up.

"You want iron?" Anders asked.

The stranger seemed to consider the question.

"No."

His voice was hoarse, not from drink, but from disuse.

"Food, then," Anders said. "Harland's."

The stranger looked in the direction of the trading house.

“A bed?”

“Ask Harland. Or ask Walters, if you got money and trouble enough.”

The stranger gave no sign that he understood the joke. His eyes moved once over the forge, the hammer, the sled shoe, then returned to Anders. They were not wild eyes. That would have been easier. They were steady, and because they were steady they made the blacksmith uncomfortable.

“What place is this?” the stranger asked.

Anders stared at him.

“Mary Creek.”

The stranger nodded slowly, as if the name answered more than the question.

He went next to the saw shed, where two men were stacking rough planks against the weather. He asked the same questions there. Where could a man sleep? Where could he get food? Was there a church? Was there law? The men answered him with the shortness men use when they are not sure whether a stranger is poor, dangerous, or mad.

One of them, a freighter named Cole, later said the man thanked them politely enough.

The other said he had not liked the way the stranger looked past them, toward the cemetery.

By the time he reached Harland’s Trading House, the light had nearly gone.

The door opened before him on heat, tobacco smoke, lamp glow, and the smell of boiled meat. Harland’s was still half empty at that hour. The evening crowd had not yet gathered, and only three men stood near the stove, their backs turned to the warmth. Harland himself was behind the counter, cutting tobacco with a small knife and counting every shaving.

The stranger stepped inside and closed the door carefully behind him.

The room changed.

Nothing visible happened. No man spoke. No glass broke. The stove went on ticking, and the lamps burned with their usual yellow unease. Yet all three men near the stove turned at once, and Harland’s knife stopped moving.

It was not that the stranger was the largest man there. He was not. Nor the roughest. Mary Creek had seen men come in with blood on their sleeves and no explanation offered. But there was about him something used up and not finished. He looked like a man who had gone through hell, found no gate out of it, and so had walked on until hell itself tired of holding him.

Harland was the first to recover.

“You buying?” he asked.

The stranger turned his eyes on him.

“A meal. Coffee. A place to sit.”

“You got money?”

The stranger reached inside his coat and laid two coins on the counter.

Harland took them, bit one without shame, and pointed toward a table near the wall.

“Sit there.”

The stranger sat.

A plate was brought to him by Harland’s hired boy: beans, salt pork, biscuit hard at the edges, and coffee black enough to float a nail. The stranger ate slowly. Not greedily, though he must have been hungry. He cut each piece small and chewed as if eating were a duty he did not fully trust.

When he had finished, he took from inside his coat a folded paper, or perhaps several papers, wrapped in oilcloth. He spread one on the table and bent over it.

It was not a newspaper. Harland saw that much when he passed near with a bottle hidden behind his apron. The paper looked older, handled often, creased white along its folds. There were marks on it that might have been a map, or a claim sketch, or a letter gone soft from damp and years.

The stranger read it without moving except to turn it once toward the light.

“What’s your name?” Harland asked after a while.

The stranger did not look up.

“Brown.”

“Brown what?”

“Will Brown.”

Harland waited, but no more came.

“From where?”

Brown folded the paper carefully before answering.

“North.”

That was all.

By early evening the men began to gather.

Dark had settled hard outside. The wind came down the creek and drove loose snow against the walls with a dry whispering sound. One by one, men entered with shoulders hunched and hats pulled low. They stamped their boots, shook frost from their sleeves, cursed the cold, and moved toward the stove. Dogs barked outside and were kicked away from the door. Someone laughed. Someone called for coffee. Someone else asked Harland why flour cost more every time a man blinked.

The stranger remained at his table.

He had his back to the wall and his face toward the room. No one had told him to sit that way. Men noticed it.

“Who’s that?” asked one.

“Says Brown,” Harland answered.

“Brown who?”

“Just Brown, near as I can get.”

This caused some laughter, though not much. The stranger did not react.

A trapper with a red scarf said he had the look of a man who had eaten his dogs. Another said no, he had the look of a man whose dogs had eaten one another first. The jokes were quiet. They were made more to test the room than to amuse it.

Will Brown drank his coffee and watched the door.

It opened again near seven o'clock, bringing in a blast of cold and two men wrapped in heavy coats. One was short and bent, with a cough that had been with him too long. The other was Silas Vane.

Silas filled the doorway before he entered it.

He was a big man, wide through the chest and shoulders, thick in the neck, heavy in the hands. Age had not reduced him so much as settled him. He had been a trapper once, and a hard one. There were men who said he had known the northern country when most of it had no trail but animal paths. There were others who said Silas had made some of those trails with an axe in one hand and a rifle in the other.

But he no longer ran traplines himself, except for show and memory. In recent years he had turned owner. He had men under him now, younger men who froze and starved and brought in fur while Silas bought supplies, lent money, arranged routes, and took the greater share because he owned the traps, the dogs, the credit, or the debt. He called it a company. Others called it Silas Vane's rope.

He had sons too. Three of them, grown and broad like himself, with their father's temper and less of his caution. They were not in Mary Creek that night. Two were north checking a line. One was west with dogs.

Silas came in laughing at something the coughing man had said.

Then he saw Will Brown.

The laughter stopped.

It did not fade. It stopped as if cut.

Men later remembered that moment differently. Some said Silas went white all at once. Some said he first turned red, then pale. Harland said the big man's mouth opened but no sound came. The coughing man beside him said Silas smelled suddenly of fear, sharp and sour under the wool and smoke.

Brown remained seated.

Only his eyes changed.

Silas took one step into the room and no more. His hand had closed on the door latch behind him, though he did not seem aware of it. His gaze moved over Brown's face, down to his hands, then back to his face.

"No," Silas said.

No one moved.

The stove ticked.

Brown folded the paper on the table and placed both hands flat beside it.

Silas swallowed. His voice came again, but changed now. It was lower, and the name that came out of him seemed dragged from a place he had buried badly.

“Rusk.”

The room went still.

It was not a loud word, but every man heard it.

Brown rose.

He did not rise in anger. He rose quietly, almost wearily, as if the moment had been appointed long ago and had merely arrived late.

Silas’s right hand moved toward his coat.

It never reached inside.

Brown crossed the space between them with the speed of a striking snake. There was a flash of steel, small and gray in the lamplight. His hand moved once, inward and upward. Silas made a sound that was not speech. His great body stiffened.

For a heartbeat he remained standing.

His face had become terrible.

Not pained. Not surprised. Afraid.

Whatever he saw in Will Brown at that final instant was worse than the knife. His eyes widened, and the flesh of his cheeks sagged, and the power seemed to go out of him before the blood did. Then his knees folded. He struck the floor heavily enough to shake the nearest table.

The room broke open.

Men shouted. The coughing man fell backward over a bench. Harland came from behind the counter with his own knife in his hand. Brown turned once, the bloody blade still low at his side. His face was calm. That calm frightened them more than rage would have.

Cole, the freighter, hit him first from behind with a chair. It broke across Brown’s shoulder and drove him to one knee. Another man kicked the knife from his hand. Anders Lofgren, who had come in late and stood near the stove, seized Brown by the arms and bore him down with a smith’s strength. Three more fell on him. He did not plead. He did not curse. He fought only once, a short savage twist that nearly freed one hand, and then he was under them.

“Rope!” Harland shouted.

They tied him with packing cord first, then with dog trace when someone brought it from outside. They bound his wrists behind his back and looped another turn around his chest. His breath came hard, but his eyes remained open and fixed on Silas Vane.

Silas did not move.

Father Nicholas was not in Harland's when the killing happened. He was in his room behind the chapel, mending the split seam of one boot by lamplight, when a boy came beating on the blue door with both fists.

"Father! Father! There's killing at Harland's!"

By the time he reached the trading house, Silas Vane lay on the floor with his coat opened and a blanket thrown uselessly over him. Men stood around in a half-circle, speaking too loudly and too little. Brown sat bound in a chair near the wall, his face bruised where someone had struck him after the tying was done.

Father Nicholas knelt beside Silas.

There was nothing to do. The knife had gone deep and true. Death had come at once.

He made the sign of the cross over the dead man. As he did, he glanced at Brown and found the stranger watching him.

Not Silas.

Him.

"What is your name?" Father Nicholas asked.

"Will Brown."

The priest waited.

Brown's mouth moved slightly. It might have been a smile. It might have been pain.

"That will serve," he said.

They took him to the mayor's cabin under guard.

By then half of Mary Creek had come out despite the cold. Men stood in doorways. Women watched from behind oiled cloth windows. Dogs barked and strained at chains. Word ran faster than sense. Silas Vane had been murdered. A stranger had done it. The stranger had been called by another name. No, Silas had called him that. No, Brown had confessed. No, Brown had said nothing. No, Silas had drawn first. No, Silas had died before touching his coat.

At the town office, John Walters was already in a panic.

He had been eating supper when the news came. Abigail Walters had risen from the table before he had finished asking who was dead. By the time Brown was brought in, she had cleared the front room, lit two lamps, and ordered her husband to put on his coat because a mayor should not receive a murderer in shirtsleeves.

Walters stood near the desk, pale and uncertain, while the bound man was pushed inside.

"Silas Vane," someone said. "Dead on Harland's floor."

Walters looked at Brown, then at the men, then toward the inner door where his wife stood with her arms folded.

"This is a grave matter," he said.

No one answered. They knew that already.

The cell door was opened. Brown was shoved inside, untied only after the door had been shut between him and the room. Anders Lofgren himself checked the hinges and the bars. Harland demanded a hanging before midnight. Cole said they ought to wait for Silas's sons. Someone else said waiting for Vane's boys was a good way to have another killing.

Walters lifted both hands.

"Quiet. Quiet, now. There will be order."

Abigail Walters looked at him, and he added with more force:

"There will be a court in the morning."

The word comforted him as soon as he said it. Court sounded proper. It sounded like civilization. It sounded as though the thing had already been placed in a box and labeled.

But when the men left, and the door was barred, and only Walters, his wife, Father Nicholas, and the prisoner remained, the mayor's strength thinned again.

"This is bad," he whispered. "This is very bad."

Abigail turned on him.

"A man has been murdered in the middle of town. Of course it is bad."

"Silas's sons—"

"Will want blood."

"They'll tear the place apart."

"Not if you do your duty before they get here."

Walters rubbed both hands over his face.

"We should send word."

"We will send word," Abigail said. "And by the time they come in, the law will have done what the law must. Unless you mean to let those boys conduct it themselves."

Father Nicholas looked toward the cell. Brown sat on the narrow bench within, elbows on knees, head bowed. He might have been asleep but for the open eyes.

"Has he said why?" Walters asked.

"No," said Father Nicholas.

"Ask him."

The priest stepped nearer the bars.

"Will Brown."

The prisoner did not lift his head.

"You killed Silas Vane before witnesses. Have you anything to say?"

Brown remained silent for so long that Walters shifted impatiently. Then the stranger looked up.

"Silas Vane knew me."

"That is not an answer," Abigail said sharply.

Brown's eyes moved to her and then away, as if she had no part in the matter.

"It is answer enough for tonight."

A man was sent before dawn to find Silas Vane's sons.

His name was Martin Hale, and he left with two dogs and a rifle, cursing the errand and the cold. The Vane boys were believed to be less than a day out, checking a line near the west fork. Hale did not want to be the one to tell them their father was dead, but Walters promised him credit at Harland's and Abigail promised him worse if he refused.

The next morning the cold sharpened.

It was a different cold from the day before. Men felt it as soon as they opened their doors. It bit through wool and found the seams in gloves. Water buckets had frozen solid. The creek had taken on a deeper silence. Smoke from chimneys rose straight a few feet and then flattened under a low sky the color of lead.

Mary Creek woke early and came together around the town office.

Court was held in the front room of Walters's cabin. There was no judge, unless Walters could be called one. There was no jury in the proper sense, though eight men were brought in and made to stand along the wall. Harland came. Anders came. Cole came with a bandaged cheek from the struggle. Father Nicholas stood near the stove. Abigail Walters remained in the back room with the door open, invisible except when someone's hesitation displeased her.

Brown was brought from the cell with his hands bound before him.

He looked neither frightened nor proud. His face was swollen along one cheek. Dried blood darkened his collar. When asked his name, he said again:

"Will Brown."

Walters cleared his throat and read from a paper he had written in the night. The words were too formal for the room and not formal enough for the law they tried to summon. He accused Brown of murdering Silas Vane in Harland's Trading House before witnesses.

"Do you deny it?" Walters asked.

"No."

"You admit to the killing?"

"I struck him."

"With a knife?"

"Yes."

"With intent to kill?"

Brown looked at the mayor then, and for the first time something like life entered his face.

"I did not cross all that country to frighten him."

The room stirred.

Walters swallowed.

"You had quarrel with Silas Vane?"

"Yes."

"What quarrel?"

Brown said nothing.

Walters pressed him, partly because Harland was watching and partly because Abigail was silent behind him.

"What quarrel?"

Brown's wrists shifted in the rope.

"That is between men who are dead."

"Silas Vane is dead," Walters said.

Brown looked toward the window, where frost had whitened the corners of the glass.

"Not all of them."

The room disliked that.

The witnesses spoke. Harland told what he had seen, keeping himself central to the matter. Cole described the knife stroke and showed his bruised hand where Brown had twisted against him. Anders Lofgren said only that the killing had been quick and that Brown had not seemed drunk.

The name Silas had spoken came up.

Rusk.

Walters asked Brown if that was his name.

Brown did not answer.

"Are you known as Rusk?"

No answer.

"Did Silas Vane know you by that name?"

Brown smiled faintly.

"He knew me."

That was all.

By noon the thing was decided. It had likely been decided before the court began.

Mary Creek could not hold a murderer through winter. It had one cell, little food, no proper guard, and no wish to invite Silas Vane's sons to make their own justice. Walters told himself this as he sat at the desk with the eyes of the town upon him. He told himself that order demanded speed. He told himself that mercy to one dangerous man might be cruelty to the whole settlement. He told himself many things because he needed them all.

When he pronounced sentence, his voice shook only once.

"Will Brown, having confessed to the killing of Silas Vane, and the killing being witnessed by men of this settlement, this court finds you guilty of murder. Sentence is death by hanging. It shall be carried out tomorrow morning at first light."

No one cheered.

No one objected.

Father Nicholas closed his eyes.

Brown only nodded, as if the mayor had confirmed a date already known to him.

That night Father Nicholas went to the cell.

The town office was quiet when he arrived. A lamp burned low in the front room. Walters sat at the desk, turning a pencil between his fingers and reading nothing. Abigail had gone to the back room but was not asleep; Father Nicholas could hear her moving there with the sharp little sounds of a woman putting things in order because men had failed to do it properly.

Walters looked up when the priest entered.

"He may not want you."

"That is not the measure of my duty."

The mayor nodded weakly and gave him the key.

Inside the cell the cold had settled close. Brown sat on the bench, coat around his shoulders, wrists free now but raw where the ropes had tightened. The high barred window showed a piece of black sky without stars.

Father Nicholas stepped in and closed the door behind him.

For a moment neither man spoke.

"I have come to hear your confession," the priest said.

Brown looked at him through the dim lamplight.

"No."

"You are to die in the morning."

"I know."

"Then you should not carry unconfessed sin before God."

At that, Brown gave a dry sound that was almost laughter.

"God has heard plenty from that country."

Father Nicholas sat on the edge of the small stool Walters had provided for prisoners who had visitors or interrogators. The wood creaked beneath him.

"Silas called you Rusk."

Brown's face changed, but only slightly.

"Men call other men many things."

"Was it your name?"

"It was one of them."

"Is Will Brown your true name?"

"No."

The answer came so plainly that Father Nicholas felt the room grow colder around it.

"What is your true name?"

Brown leaned back against the wall. His eyes were deep in shadow.

"That is not for this town."

"Then why give a false one?"

"Because Mary Creek wanted a stranger. I let them have one."

The priest studied him. He had sat with condemned men before. Most were afraid. Some boasted. Some wept. Some begged for letters to be written. Brown did none of these things. He seemed like a man whose death was inconvenient only because it had arrived before he had finished his work.

"Why did you kill Silas Vane?"

Brown's gaze went to the cell door, then to the little square of darkness beyond the window.

"Because he was there."

"That is not confession."

"No."

"Do you repent of it?"

Brown looked back at him.

"Would repentance put breath in him?"

"It may yet save your soul."

"My soul went north a long time ago, Father."

The use of the title startled Nicholas, though he did not show it.

"You know me?"

"I asked who kept the chapel."

"Why?"

Brown's hands rested on his knees. The scars at his wrists showed pale even in the poor light.

"Because I need something from you."

"Forgiveness?"

"No."

The priest waited.

Brown bent forward. His voice lowered, not in secrecy exactly, but in weight.

"When they cut me down tomorrow, do not let them put me in the town ground."

Father Nicholas said nothing.

"I want no hill grave under one of your little crosses. No place beside men who died soft in beds or drunk under tables. I want to go north."

"That may not be possible."

"It is possible."

"Winter is close."

"Not close enough."

"Where?"

Brown's eyes held him.

“Beyond the last timberland. Past the black spruce and the dead creek. There is ground near Black Mercy Ridge.”

At the name, Father Nicholas felt a small movement of unease.

He knew the name as all men in Mary Creek knew it, not from maps but from refusals. Black Mercy Ridge lay somewhere north and east, beyond ordinary trapping routes. Men spoke of it only when telling another man not to go there. There had been old troubles in that country. Lost parties. Bad winters. A trapping camp that failed. Stories changed depending on who told them, but the warning remained the same.

No decent man in Mary Creek had visited that ground in years.

“Why there?” Father Nicholas asked.

Brown’s mouth tightened.

“Because that is where the rest of me is.”

The priest did not answer at once.

Outside, the wind moved along the wall of the mayor’s cabin. It found a crack somewhere and spoke through it thinly.

“Will Brown,” Father Nicholas said at last, “if that is the name I must use, I cannot promise such a thing.”

“You can.”

“I have no team.”

“Men here do.”

“I have no authority.”

“You have duty.”

The word struck harder because it was his own.

Brown saw that it had.

“Bury me there,” he said. “Not for my sake.”

“For whose?”

For the first time, the calm left Brown’s face. Under it lay something old and fierce and nearly exhausted.

“For the men who did not come back.”

Before Father Nicholas could speak, Brown leaned away and closed his eyes.

The interview was over.

The priest remained a while longer, listening to the prisoner breathe. He wished to ask more. He wished to demand the true name. He wished to warn the man that death was not a trail he could choose by preference. But he had heard enough confessions to know when a soul had shut its door.

At last he rose and knocked for Walters.

The mayor let him out and locked the cell again.

“Well?” Walters whispered.

Father Nicholas looked back through the bars. Brown had not moved.

“He asked for burial.”

“In the cemetery?”

“No.”

Walters waited, though his face showed he did not want the answer.

“North,” Father Nicholas said. “Near Black Mercy Ridge.”

The mayor stared at him.

Chapter 4: Hanging

Will Brown did not say another word after Father Nicholas left him.

Not to the mayor, who tried once more before sleeping to ask for his true name. Not to Harland, who came to look at him through the bars with the greedy disgust of a man who wished to be near death without being touched by it. Not to Anders Lofgren, who brought a length of chain and fixed it around the lower part of the cell door because Abigail Walters said rope and hinges were not enough for a murderer. Not to the boy who carried in a cup of water and found it still untouched when he came back an hour later.

Brown sat on the narrow bench with his back to the wall and his hands loose between his knees. Now and then he looked toward the high barred window, though there was nothing to see there but darkness pressed against glass. The lamp in the outer room burned low. The stove gave off a small heat that did not reach the cell. Frost gathered on the inside of the window and crept down in little white veins.

John Walters slept badly in the room behind the office.

He had intended not to sleep at all. It seemed improper to sleep on the night before a hanging, and more than improper when the man to be hanged lay not twenty feet from his bed. But fear exhausts a man, and Walters had been afraid since the moment Silas Vane struck the floor in Harland's Trading House. So he slept in pieces, waking each time the stove settled or the wind moved along the wall.

Beside him, Abigail lay straight and still.

She did not ask whether he was awake. She knew. After twenty-nine years of marriage she could tell by the way his breathing failed at the end of each breath.

"You will do what has to be done," she said once in the dark.

Walters did not answer.

"You will not waver in front of them."

"No," he whispered.

"If you waver, they will remember it."

"I know."

"And if Silas Vane's sons come before it is finished, there will be blood in the street."

"I know, Abigail."

She turned her face toward him, though he could not see it.

"Then stop knowing and sleep."

He closed his eyes.

In the front room, beyond the office door, the condemned man remained silent.

Dawn came without color.

It was not yet full light when Mary Creek began to gather. Men came first, moving out of cabins with collars turned up and rifles carried more from habit than need. Women followed more slowly, some wrapped in shawls, some watching from doorways, unwilling to come near but unwilling not to see. Dogs nosed through the trampled snow until they were kicked back or dragged away. No one spoke loudly. Voices traveled strangely in the cold.

The hanging tree stood beyond the town office, partway between the last cabin and the cemetery rise.

It was a black spruce older than Mary Creek. Its lower limbs had been cut away years before, leaving one heavy branch that reached outward over a patch of open ground. No one had planted it for that purpose. No one had named it openly. But men had a way of giving use to what the land provided, and when a thief had been whipped there, and later a horse killer threatened there, and later still a madman tied there until he froze quiet, the tree had acquired its meaning.

There had been one hanging before Will Brown.

A man named Kettering had shot another man in the back over a claim line and had gone to the tree cursing until the moment the rope closed his throat. That had been six years earlier. Men still remembered the sounds he made. Since then, the branch had stood unused, but not forgotten. Snow lay along it now in a white seam. The rope Harland had provided hung from it stiff and dark.

Father Nicholas arrived before the prisoner.

He wore his black coat, patched at the elbows, and carried his prayer book inside it to keep the pages from stiffening in the cold. His beard had frosted white around his mouth. He stood near the tree and looked once toward the cemetery. The graves had vanished under snow except where crosses leaned through. The dead of Mary Creek lay quiet on their hill, waiting to receive whatever the living decided to send them.

John Walters came out of the town office with his hat in his hands before Abigail sent him back inside to put it on.

When he returned, he had the look of a man walking toward his own sentence. Two men stood on either side of him, Cole the freighter and Anders Lofgren. Harland was already by the tree, stamping his feet and pretending not to be cold. His eyes moved often toward the trail west, as if expecting Silas Vane's sons to come over the rise at any moment.

They had not come.

The man sent to fetch them had not returned either.

This gave the morning an added strain. The hanging was not only justice now. It was a race.

At first light, they brought Will Brown out.

His hands were bound before him. Someone had given him his coat, though no hat. His dark hair was damp where frost had melted and frozen again. He looked neither left nor right as he stepped down from the town office porch. If he saw the crowd, he made no sign. If he saw Father Nicholas, he made no sign of that either.

He walked steadily.

That steadiness angered some men. A condemned man was expected to resist, to curse, to weep, to proclaim innocence, to ask for whiskey, to spit at the mayor, to give the crowd something with which to steady itself. Brown gave them nothing. He walked as if the tree belonged not to Mary Creek but to him, as if they were all merely witnesses invited too late.

They placed him beneath the branch.

Walters unfolded a paper with hands that had begun to shake. The paper cracked in the cold.

“Will Brown,” he began.

His voice came thinly. He swallowed and tried again.

“Will Brown, you have been found guilty by the court of Mary Creek for the murder of Silas Vane, committed before witnesses in Harland’s Trading House. Sentence has been passed according to the law and necessity of this settlement. Have you any final words?”

Brown looked at him.

The whole crowd waited.

A raven called once from somewhere beyond the cemetery, an ugly dry sound in the gray morning.

Brown said nothing.

Walters licked his lips.

“Father?”

Father Nicholas stepped forward. He did not ask Brown to confess again. Something in the man’s silence forbade repetition. Instead he opened his prayer book and read for the dead and the dying, for judgment and mercy, for the soul departing the body, and for all men who stood in need of grace though they knew it not. His voice did not shake. It was quiet, and because it was quiet the people listened.

Brown kept his eyes on the north.

When the prayer ended, the rope was put around his neck.

Cole did it. Not because he wished to, but because he had drawn the task in a manner no man later remembered arranging. Harland wanted to do it and did not. Anders would have done it but was asked to stand by the prisoner’s

arms. Walters could not have tied a knot then if his own life had depended on it.

The knot was clumsy. Harland corrected it with a curse under his breath.

Brown did not resist.

The sled box had been placed beneath him. It was the same box used for freight in winter and for carrying bodies when needed. The wood creaked under his boots.

Walters gave the signal.

For a moment no one moved.

Then Anders Lofgren kicked the box away.

The body fell.

A sound went through the crowd. Not a cry, not speech, but a single breath drawn and held by many throats. Brown's body turned once at the end of the rope. His bound hands jerked, then stilled. Snow shaken from the branch drifted down across his shoulders and hair.

Father Nicholas lowered his eyes and continued praying.

No one else spoke.

It took longer than men expected and less time than they feared.

When it was over, they left him hanging for a while because no one wished to be first to say he should be cut down. The day brightened a little but did not warm. Smoke rose from chimneys. Somewhere in town, a dog began howling and would not stop until someone struck it silent.

At last Walters nodded.

They brought the body down.

Will Brown seemed smaller dead. All men did. The force that had made them troublesome departed, and what remained had to be lifted, arranged, and carried. Yet with Brown there was still something present that made the men hurry. Cole would not touch his face. Harland swore when one of the dead hands brushed his sleeve. Anders alone handled the body without show, though afterward he stood apart and rubbed his palms together as if something cold had passed through his gloves.

The coffin had been made in haste during the night from boards kept in the saw shed.

It was plain, unpainted, and too new for dignity. The nails stood bright in the wood. There had been no time to line it, no time to fit it well. Brown was laid inside still wearing his worn coat and broken boots. Father Nicholas made the sign of the cross over him. Harland asked whether the priest meant to waste more words.

Father Nicholas looked at him until Harland looked away.

The lid was not nailed down at once.

This was because there remained argument about what was to be done with the body. Walters wanted him buried quickly in the cemetery, in a corner

where Silas Vane's people need not pass. Harland agreed. Several others did too, more from impatience than conviction. No one wanted the dead stranger kept in town any longer than necessary.

But Father Nicholas remembered the request.

North. Beyond the last timberland. Near Black Mercy Ridge.

He mentioned it quietly to Walters while the men stood near the coffin, stamping in the snow.

The mayor's face tightened.

"Out of the question."

"He asked it before death."

"Men ask many things before death."

"It was his last request."

"It was a damned foolish request."

The profanity seemed to surprise Walters himself. He glanced toward the coffin and then away.

Abigail had come as far as the porch of the town office. She had not watched the hanging from near the tree, but from there she had seen enough.

"He does not go north," she said.

No one answered.

She came down the steps, her shawl held tight beneath her chin.

"Do you hear me, John? The matter is finished. Put him in the ground and have done with it."

Walters looked at Father Nicholas, then at his wife, then toward the trail where Vane's sons had still not appeared.

"We will decide by evening," he said weakly.

Abigail's eyes hardened.

"There is nothing to decide."

But there was, because the dead man had spoken to the priest and because the priest did not easily surrender what he believed duty had placed in his hands.

In the end, no grave was dug that day.

The ground on the cemetery rise had already begun to harden badly, and the men who might have dug it found reasons to be elsewhere. Walters said the body could wait one night in the old storage lean-to behind the town office, where confiscated goods, broken tack, and winter tools were kept. The coffin was carried there and laid across two trestles. Only then was the lid nailed shut.

Each hammer stroke sounded too loud.

Will Brown passed from sight beneath raw boards and bright nails.

By afternoon, Mary Creek had begun to talk again.

It did not talk well. The settlement had been shaken and now tried to put itself back into familiar shapes. Men argued at Harland's about whether Brown

had been mad, whether Silas had wronged him, whether Rusk was a name or curse or mistake. Some said Silas Vane had recognized him from old trapping days. Some said the stranger had come north looking for Silas and found him by chance. Others said there was no chance in it.

Harland raised the price of coffee and poured whiskey privately for those who had coin.

Father Nicholas remained in the chapel until dusk, but no one came for confession. Men who had watched a hanging often stayed away from God for a while. It was as though they feared He might ask what part of it had pleased them.

Toward evening, the man sent after Silas Vane's sons returned alone.

He came in with ice in his beard and one dog limping. He had not found them. Their camp on the west fork was empty, though the fire pit was recent and their gear was gone. Tracks led farther up the line. He had followed as long as he dared, then turned back.

This news did not ease Walters.

The Vane sons were still out there, still ignorant or perhaps already knowing by some other road. Either way, they had not come in. The matter remained unfinished.

Night settled early and hard.

By seven, Mary Creek was dark except for windows lit in amber squares. The cold had deepened again. Frost crept over door hinges and along the rims of buckets. The creek made a cracking sound once, long and low, like a plank breaking under weight. Dogs answered it with uneasy barking.

In the mayor's cabin, John Walters tried to eat supper and failed.

Abigail ate in silence across from him. She had made beans and salt pork, but the smell turned his stomach. He pushed food around his plate until she took the plate away.

"You must stop this," she said.

"What?"

"This trembling."

"I am not trembling."

"You have been trembling since dawn."

He held his hands under the table.

She saw and said nothing for a while.

From the front room came the small sounds of the office cooling: a board settling, a coal shifting in the stove, the lamp flame ticking in its chimney. Beyond that, behind the thick rear wall, lay the storage lean-to where the coffin had been placed.

Walters thought of it against his will.

The raw boards. The bright nails. The dead face inside.

He poured tea and did not drink it.

"You did what had to be done," Abigail said.

"Yes."

"The town saw it. That matters."

"Yes."

"If the Vane boys come angry, they will find justice already made."

"Yes."

"And tomorrow we will bury him."

Walters looked up.

"In the cemetery?"

"Of course in the cemetery."

"Father Nicholas—"

"Father Nicholas is not mayor."

"No," Walters said.

The word lay between them with more meaning than he intended.

Abigail stood, took the lamp, and went to the back room.

"I am going to bed," she said. "You will do the same. In the morning you will send men to dig, and this whole ugly thing will be in the ground before noon."

Walters sat a while longer in the dimming kitchen.

At last he banked the stove, checked the front door, and went to bed.

He slept badly again.

The first knock came sometime after midnight.

It was not loud.

That was what made it worse. Had it been a crash, Walters might have told himself some beam had split in the cold, or that a loose shutter had struck the wall. But this was no sound of weather or timber. It was small, dry, and deliberate.

Knock.

Walters opened his eyes.

The cabin was dark except for the faint red pulse of the stove. Beside him, Abigail lay straight beneath the blankets. For a moment he thought she was asleep.

He held his breath.

Nothing followed.

Then it came again.

Knock.

Abigail's eyes opened.

Neither of them moved.

The third knock came after the same patient pause.

Knock.

Then silence.

Walters knew at once where the sound had come from.

Not the front door. Not the outer wall. Not the lean-to where the coffin had been placed.

The cell.

The one-cell prison stood on the far side of the office room, locked and empty. Its door was barred. Anders Lofgren's chain still held it fast. There was no prisoner inside. No man living had any business there.

Will Brown had spent his last night in that cell.

Will Brown had been hanged at dawn.

For a long while, neither Walters nor his wife spoke.

At last Abigail said, very quietly, "John."

He turned his head toward her, though in the dark he could see only the pale shape of her face.

"You heard it?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He waited for her to say it was the wood. The cold. The settling of the cabin. Anything. She did not.

Walters sat up slowly. The room seemed colder than it had before. He reached for the matches on the small table beside the bed and struck one. It flared bright, showing his hand shaking around the flame. He lit the lamp, and its weak yellow circle pushed the dark back only a little.

From the office room beyond their door came no further sound.

The silence was worse than the knocking.

Walters looked at the door that led from their room into the office.

Abigail followed his gaze.

"Do not open it," she said.

He had not meant to. Even before she spoke, he knew he would not cross that room and stand before the cell. He would not lift the lamp to the bars. He would not test the lock. If something had knocked from within an empty cell, then it could remain unanswered until morning.

He drew on his trousers and coat with stiff fingers. Abigail wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and sat upright against the wall, her face hard in the lamplight. Neither of them returned to bed properly. They stayed there with the lamp burning between them, listening.

No fourth knock came.

Once the stove settled. Once the wind pressed against the cabin and passed on. Once a dog barked somewhere near Harland's and was answered by another farther down the creek. Ordinary sounds, all of them, and yet each made Walters start as if the dead man had laid a hand upon the door.

Hour after hour, they waited.

The office remained silent.

The cell remained silent.

At dawn, a thin gray light came slowly into the window. Only then did Abigail rise. Her face looked older than it had the night before, though her voice was steady when she spoke.

“You will say nothing of this.”

Walters sat with both hands clasped between his knees.

“No,” he said.

But he knew, and she knew, that silence would not make the sound less real.

Three knocks had come from the empty cell.

And neither husband nor wife had slept again before morning.

Chapter 5: The coffin leaves town

By morning, all of Mary Creek knew the dead man was still above ground.

No one said at first how they knew it. No one had seen the coffin in the lean-to behind the mayor's cabin except those who put it there. No bell had been rung. No notice had been nailed to Harland's door. Yet the knowledge moved through the settlement before the sun had cleared the spruce. It went from stove to stove, from woodpile to well, from Harland's counter to the blacksmith's shed, and everywhere it traveled it gathered unease.

Will Brown had been hanged, but not buried.

That was the trouble.

Dead men, in Mary Creek, were to be put away quickly. A body above ground was an unfinished thing. It drew talk, and talk drew memory, and memory drew fear. Even men who had no religion in them disliked an unburied corpse. They did not care what happened to the soul, but they cared greatly what might happen to a settlement that allowed the dead to remain among the living.

John Walters understood this as well as any man.

He had not slept. Abigail had not slept either, though she denied it by the force with which she moved about the cabin. By dawn she had made coffee too strong to drink, swept the same patch of floor three times, and told her husband twice that he looked like a man waiting to be shot.

"You will settle it today," she said.

"Yes."

"Before noon."

"Yes."

"And not one word of last night."

Walters looked toward the door that led into the office room.

Beyond it stood the empty cell.

No sound had come from it since the three knocks. No scrape. No whisper. No shifting weight on the bench. In the gray morning, the whole thing seemed nearly impossible. But the memory of it had not faded. It sat in him with the cold steadiness of a stone.

"No," he said. "Not one word."

Abigail placed his coat in his hands.

"Then go be mayor."

By eight o'clock he had sent for men.

He began with those who had helped at the hanging. Cole the freighter came in rubbing his jaw and said his shoulder had been badly strained when

they took Brown down. He lifted his arm halfway to prove it and winced a little too late. Walters let him go.

Anders Lofgren said he had orders backed up at the forge and two sled shoes to finish before weather closed the trail. He did not refuse in so many words, but he did not agree either. He looked toward the lean-to once, then returned his gaze to the mayor.

"I fix iron," he said. "Not dead men."

Harland said he could not leave the trading house. Men were coming in for supplies, he said, and with Silas Vane dead there would be debts to settle, accounts to review, claims to protect. He made it all sound like public service. When Walters pressed him, Harland leaned across the counter and spoke low.

"You want to send somebody out with that box, pay them. Pay them well."

Walters tried others.

One man had a cough. Another had lame dogs. A third said his wife was poorly, though everyone knew he had no wife in Mary Creek. Two younger men looked interested until their mothers heard of it. One hunter said the weather was turning. Another said the weather would turn if they went. A miner who had watched the hanging from the back of the crowd laughed and said he had no wish to carry a dead murderer into wolf country, not for God, the mayor, or any man's last request.

By midmorning, Walters had collected more excuses than volunteers.

He returned to the town office with his ears burning from the cold and from humiliation. Abigail heard him enter and came out from the back room.

"Well?"

"They are reluctant."

"They are cowards."

"They are practical."

"They are cowards," she said again. "Did you offer payment?"

"I cannot pay half the town to bury one man."

"You may have to pay one man enough."

Walters removed his gloves slowly.

"There is no one."

"Yes," Abigail said. "There is."

He looked at her.

"No."

"Edmond Smith."

Walters said nothing.

The name had the same effect in a room that a shadow had when it crossed the sun.

Edmond Smith was thirty-four years old and already had the look of a man who would not live long unless killed late. He was not tall in the way Will Brown had been tall, but he was built with a hard, compact strength. His

shoulders were broad, his arms heavy, his hands scarred from traps, knives, rope, frostbite, and fights. One ear had been torn along the top and healed badly. There was an old white mark across his lower lip, so that even when his face was still he seemed to be halfway through a snarl.

He trapped, guided, drank, and fought.

Of those four occupations, he was best at the first and worst after the fourth. No man in Mary Creek knew the country better. Edmond had run lines in weather that kept other men near stoves. He knew which creek beds were safe under snow and which hid black water. He knew the old ridges, the abandoned cabins, the places where timber ended and the wind took possession of the land. He had come back from country that had kept stronger men. He had once carried a broken partner thirty miles on a sled after shooting all but two of the dogs for meat. Or so the story went.

Men feared him in Harland's Trading House.

Not always openly. He could be merry when drunk, and generous after a good run, and quiet for days in a way that let others forget what lived in him. But his temper had no bottom. When it rose, it came fast and blind. He had broken a man's jaw over a card hand, cut another across the arm for laughing at his dogs, and once driven a miner through Harland's front window so hard the man took the sash with him into the snow. Afterward Edmond had paid for the window and bought the miner whiskey, which Mary Creek considered almost an apology.

He drank more than he should. Everyone said it. No one said it too close to his face.

Walters did not want Edmond Smith anywhere near a public duty.

"He will ask too much," the mayor said.

"Then bargain."

"He will insult me."

"Endure it."

"He may refuse."

"Then you are no worse off."

Walters looked toward the office wall. Beyond it, in the lean-to, the coffin waited.

He put on his gloves again.

Edmond was at Harland's.

It was still morning, but he had a cup before him that did not contain coffee. He sat alone near the stove, his back to the wall, one boot braced against the bench opposite him. His coat hung open. A skinning knife lay on the table within reach, not displayed exactly, but not hidden. His hair was dark and rough, his beard short, his eyes pale gray and bloodshot from drink or cold or both.

The men in the room went quiet when Walters entered. The quiet sharpened when they saw whom he approached.

“Edmond,” Walters said.

Smith did not rise.

“Mayor.”

“I need a word.”

“You got one.”

“In private.”

Edmond looked around the room. “No private here.”

Harland leaned on the counter to listen better.

Walters felt heat climb his neck.

“It concerns the burial.”

Edmond’s face did not change, but one finger stopped tapping against the cup.

“What burial?”

“You know what burial.”

“The hanged man?”

“Yes.”

Edmond took a slow drink.

“Burn him.”

The words fell flat and ugly into the room.

Father Nicholas, who had entered behind Walters unnoticed, stopped near the door.

Walters glanced back at him, then returned his eyes to Edmond.

“That is not our custom.”

“It ought to be.”

“He asked for burial.”

“Dead men ask nothing.”

“This one did.”

Edmond smiled without warmth.

“Then he should have asked before putting a knife in Silas Vane.”

A few men murmured approval.

Father Nicholas stepped forward.

“He asked me.”

Edmond turned his head. His gaze moved over the priest, taking in the black coat, the frost on the beard, the worn gloves.

“Then you burn him, Father.”

“He is to be buried.”

“Where?”

The question was casual, but something in Edmond had tightened around it.

Walters heard it and did not understand why.

Father Nicholas answered before the mayor could stop him.

"North. Near Black Mercy Ridge."

The room changed again.

It had changed once when Will Brown entered. Now it changed in another way. Men looked down into cups. Harland stopped leaning. Someone near the stove muttered under his breath and crossed himself badly, as though embarrassed by the gesture.

Edmond Smith did not move.

Only his eyes shifted, very slightly, from Father Nicholas to Walters.

"Who told you that name?"

"The condemned man," the priest said.

"Brown?"

"Yes."

Edmond's hand closed around the cup.

"That ground is no place for a priest."

"It is no place for any man," Harland said, attempting a laugh and failing.

Walters cleared his throat.

"I do not ask you to go so far. Only to take the coffin out. Some miles north, enough distance from town. Father Nicholas will perform the burial where suitable ground can be found."

"No," Father Nicholas said.

Walters turned sharply.

The priest's voice remained quiet.

"He asked for Black Mercy Ridge."

"He also murdered a man," Walters snapped. "There are limits to courtesy."

"There are limits to duty also," Edmond said. "And mine ends before that ridge."

Walters faced him again.

"I am prepared to pay."

Now Edmond looked interested.

"How much?"

The figure Walters named was respectable.

Edmond laughed.

The mayor named a larger one.

Edmond laughed again, softer this time, and leaned back.

"You want me to haul a murderer's box into cold country, with a priest for company, after men heard him named Rusk in Harland's room, and you offer me freight pay?"

Walters stiffened at the name.

"You know it?"

"I know a bad road when I hear one."

“How much?”

Edmond named a sum so large that Harland whistled.

Walters went pale.

“That is robbery.”

“No,” Edmond said. “Robbery is when a man has choice.”

The mayor’s mouth opened and shut.

Edmond leaned forward, the cup forgotten now.

“You have no men. You have no dogs you trust. You have Vane’s boys somewhere out on the line, and when they come in and find their father dead and the killer still lying cozy behind your office, they will make a court of their own. You want that? You want the Vane boys drunk and righteous with rifles in the street?”

Walters said nothing.

“Pay me,” Edmond said. “Or bury him yourself.”

“I could order you.”

For a moment no one breathed.

Edmond stood.

He did it slowly. He was not as big as Silas Vane had been, but there was more danger in him because it seemed less governed by age or habit. The chair legs scraped along the floor. His pale eyes fixed on Walters with such open contempt that the mayor took half a step back before remembering where he was.

“Order me,” Edmond said.

Walters swallowed.

Father Nicholas moved slightly, not between them, but near enough.

“That is enough.”

Edmond did not look at him.

“No,” he said. “Let him order me.”

Walters’s lips had gone dry.

Abigail would have known what to say. Abigail would not have stepped back. Abigail would have struck the man with words if not with iron. But Abigail was not there, and Walters was, and all Harland’s room watched him fail by inches.

He lowered his eyes first.

“How much in advance?”

Edmond sat again.

“All of it.”

“That is impossible.”

“Then find a better man.”

Walters’s hands opened and closed.

“All right.”

There was no dignity in the agreement. It came out of him like air from a punctured lung.

Edmond nodded once, as if the matter had always been settled.

"I take the coffin three, maybe four miles north. Find dead timber. Burn it. Come back before night if the trail holds."

Father Nicholas spoke at once.

"No."

Edmond looked at him.

"No?"

"The body is not to be burned."

"It is when I haul it."

"I will not permit it."

Edmond smiled then, and this smile was worse than the first because there was amusement in it.

"You will not permit it?"

Father Nicholas held his gaze.

"No."

Walters closed his eyes briefly. The thing was already slipping from his hands.

"The priest goes with you," the mayor said.

Edmond turned back to him.

"What?"

"Father Nicholas goes with the coffin. He will see the burial done."

"I do not take priests on trap runs."

"This is not a trap run."

"No," Edmond said. "It is worse."

Father Nicholas said, "I will go."

Walters stared at him with relief and resentment mixed together.

Edmond studied the priest for a long moment.

"You ever run a sled?"

"No."

"Handle dogs?"

"Poorly."

"Shoot?"

"If I must."

"That means no."

"It means if I must."

The trapper gave a short laugh.

"You will slow me."

"Then walk slower."

Harland grinned at that, then hid it when Edmond's eyes moved briefly in his direction.

Edmond stood again.

"I choose the dogs. I choose the load. I choose the trail. The priest keeps out of my way. If weather turns, we burn him and come back. If the dogs balk, we burn him. If the Vane boys come after us, I cut the coffin loose and save my team."

"No burning," Father Nicholas said.

Edmond stepped close enough that the priest could smell whiskey under the cold on his breath.

"You are a long way from your chapel once we leave town."

"And you are not yet beyond God."

For a moment it seemed Edmond might strike him.

Then he laughed, pushed past Walters, and went out into the cold.

Preparations began at once, partly because Walters wished the matter done and partly because Abigail, once told of the agreement, drove everyone involved with the fury of a woman who had never intended to house a corpse behind her kitchen for two nights.

The coffin was brought from the lean-to.

Men came to watch but not to help until Abigail shamed two of them into lifting. The raw boards had frosted white along the seams. No one mentioned this, though the lean-to had been dry. The nails looked black now instead of bright. Whether from cold, damp, or imagination, no man cared to examine.

The coffin was set on a sled Edmond chose himself.

It was a narrow freight sled with high runners, old but sound, its lashings recently repaired. Edmond inspected every part, cursing the town's general incompetence as he did so. He rejected the first harness, then the second. He took four dogs from his own team, not the largest but the surest: a gray bitch named Nettle, two rangy black brothers called Pike and Jar, and an old yellow-eyed brute named Saul who had scars along one flank and disliked every living creature except Edmond.

The dogs smelled the coffin and did not like it.

Saul backed away first, lips lifting. Nettle whined low and tucked her tail. Pike and Jar pulled sideways in their traces until Edmond struck the snow with his whip, not hitting them but promising that he might.

"Stand," he said.

The dogs stood.

Father Nicholas came from the chapel with a small bundle: his Bible, a prayer book, a wool blanket, a tin cup, and the leather case he carried when called to the dying. He had no proper trail gear beyond his coat and boots, both worn. Abigail Walters, seeing this, sent one of the boys to fetch a heavier pair of mittens and a fur-lined hood from the town stores. She delivered them herself and handed them to the priest without softness.

"You will freeze in those," she said, looking at his gloves.

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me. Bring the mayor's sled back."

"I will try."

"And do not let that man drink on the trail."

Father Nicholas glanced toward Edmond, who was tying the coffin down with hard, angry motions.

"That may be beyond my authority."

"Then expand your authority."

She turned away before he could answer.

Walters provided four days of food: flour, beans, bacon, coffee, a little salt, and hard biscuit. Edmond added cartridges, an axe, a shovel, a coil of rope, and a canvas sheet. He carried his rifle himself, a worn Winchester with a stock darkened by oil and use. Father Nicholas carried the Bible inside his coat.

By noon, the whole settlement had gathered again, though no one admitted it was for spectacle.

The coffin lay lashed to the sled. The dogs stood restless in their traces, steam rising from their mouths. Edmond checked the knots twice. Father Nicholas stood beside him, black coat stark against the snow. John Walters hovered near the sled, saying small useless things about weather, return time, and caution. Abigail watched from the porch with her arms folded.

"Three miles," Walters said to Edmond. "Four if needed. Find ground where he can be put down decent."

Edmond spat into the snow.

"You paid for the road. Do not walk it for me."

Walters lowered his voice.

"And no burning unless—"

"No burning," Father Nicholas said.

Edmond looked at neither of them.

"We'll see what the dead man wants once he is clear of town."

That sentence settled poorly among those near enough to hear it.

Father Nicholas stepped toward the rear of the sled, where he would walk unless the trail demanded otherwise. He looked once toward the cemetery. The crosses leaned in the pale afternoon light. Silas Vane would be buried there when his sons came in. Will Brown would not.

At least not yet.

The priest crossed himself.

Edmond saw it.

"Save your breath," he said. "You'll need it."

Then he cracked the whip above the dogs.

"Ha!"

The team lunged.

For one instant the sled did not move.

The dogs strained, claws scraping hard snow, shoulders low, breath bursting from them. The runners held as if frozen into the earth. Edmond cursed and shouted. The dogs threw their weight forward again.

The sled broke free.

It jerked ahead with a groan of wood and ice. The coffin shifted under its ropes but held fast.

Mary Creek watched as Edmond Smith, Father Nicholas, four dogs, one sled, a rifle, a Bible, three days of food, and the body of Will Brown moved north along the frozen creek.

No one called farewell.

No one wished them luck.

Behind them, the settlement stood in its shallow bend of smoke and snow, trying once more to look civilized.

Ahead lay black spruce, colder air, and the country no decent man in town had visited for years.

Chapter 6: Signs on the Trail

For the first miles, the trail north of Mary Creek was still a thing made by men.

It followed the frozen creek where the banks lay low and the spruce stood back from the ice. Sled runners had passed there before. The marks were old but readable: faint grooves hardened under new snow, dog tracks drifted half-full, the occasional black scar of an old fire where some traveler had stopped to boil coffee and curse the cold. Here and there a branch had been cut cleanly away by an axe. At one bend, a broken piece of harness hung frozen to a willow, and Edmond Smith took it down without stopping, looked it over, and threw it aside.

“Worthless,” he said.

Father Nicholas walked behind the sled.

At first he tried to help by steadying the load when the runners crossed bad ice or a ridge of wind-packed snow. Edmond told him twice to keep his hands off unless asked. After that, the priest walked with his Bible inside his coat and his eyes on the coffin.

The coffin rode badly.

It was not that it shifted. Edmond had lashed it with the care of a man who trusted knots more than prayers. The box did not slide, did not tilt, did not strain its bindings. Yet it seemed wrong upon the sled. Freight had a known look. Food sacks, iron tools, folded canvas, even dead animals lay with the honest weight of things belonging to the world. The coffin did not. It rode as if the sled had been built around it, as if the dogs were not hauling wood and body but some command none of them had agreed to obey.

The dogs knew it.

Nettle ran lead, head low, ears back. Pike and Jar pulled behind her, black bodies moving in near-perfect rhythm. Saul, the old brute, had been placed nearest the sled, where Edmond could reach him with boot or whip if he chose to turn mean. But Saul did not turn mean. That troubled Father Nicholas more than growling would have. The old dog kept glancing backward, not at Edmond, not at the priest, but at the coffin. Each time he did, the hair along his spine lifted.

Edmond saw it and said nothing.

By midafternoon, Mary Creek was gone behind them as though it had never existed. No smoke showed above the trees. No sound came except the runners, the dogs, the wind, and now and then the sharp crack of ice beneath snow. The creek narrowed, bent east, then north again. The banks rose. Spruce crowded closer, their boughs heavy with early snow. The sky lowered until it seemed caught in the treetops.

"Where do you mean to stop?" Father Nicholas asked.

Edmond did not answer at once. He walked beside the dogs with his rifle slung across his back and the whip loose in one hand.

"When dark makes me."

"We were told three or four miles."

"You were told what would get the coffin out of town."

"And what were you told?"

Edmond looked back at him.

"To haul it."

"To bury it."

"To haul it," Edmond said again. "You can do the burying with your own hands if the spirit moves you."

Father Nicholas let the matter rest.

They went on.

After another hour, the last signs of common travel thinned. The sled tracks they had followed disappeared beneath windblown snow. A trapper's blaze on a spruce trunk appeared, old and nearly closed by bark, then no others came after it. The creekbed became rougher, broken by stones that rose like dark knuckles through the snow. Twice Edmond had to halt the dogs and chop a path around a place where black water showed through the ice.

The second time, he stood for a while staring down at the moving water.

"Bad freeze," he muttered.

"Is the trail unsafe?"

"All trails are unsafe."

"That is not what I asked."

Edmond spat into the dark gap. The spit vanished into the current without sound.

"It holds if it holds."

By the end of the first day, there were no more signs of trapping.

No hanging bait poles. No cut brush. No smoke stains under overhanging rock. No old camp rubbish, no rusted tin, no broken snowshoe frame left beside a tree. The wilderness seemed to have swallowed even the memory of men. The spruce grew thicker, blacker, closer. Their lower branches, dead and bare beneath the snow-laden crowns, stuck out like the fingers of drowned things reaching from the dark.

The light failed early.

It did not fade so much as withdraw. One moment the world was gray, the next it had lost shape. Edmond called halt in a stand of spruce above the creek, where the ground rose enough to be clear of overflow. He chose the place without asking Father Nicholas's opinion and set about making camp with hard efficiency.

The dogs were unhitched. The sled was turned sideways to break what little wind came through the trees. Edmond cut boughs for a bed and ordered Father Nicholas to gather deadfall. The priest did as he was told. His hands were numb inside the heavy mittens Abigail Walters had given him, and his breath froze in his beard. Each stick he picked up cracked loudly in the stillness.

When he returned, Edmond had already started the fire.

He did it quickly, with birch bark kept dry inside his coat, a few shavings cut from dead spruce, and matches struck inside his cupped hand. The flame caught low and blue, then rose yellow. Around it, the darkness seemed to lean nearer.

The coffin remained on the sled.

"Should we take it down?" Father Nicholas asked.

"No."

"The runners may freeze into the snow by morning."

"Then I'll chop them free."

"It seems unseemly."

Edmond looked at him over the fire.

"Unseemly."

"Yes."

"To leave a dead murderer on a sled?"

"To treat any dead man as freight."

"He is freight." Edmond reached into his coat and drew out a flat bottle.

"Paid freight."

Father Nicholas watched him pull the cork with his teeth.

"You drink on the trail?"

"I drink where I am thirsty."

"This country asks for a clear head."

"This country asks for many things."

Edmond tipped the bottle and drank. The smell of whiskey moved briefly through the smoke.

The dogs refused to come near the sled.

That was plain before supper. Nettle lay down first at the far side of the fire, chin on paws, eyes open. Pike and Jar circled uneasily, sniffing the snow, then settled near the priest's pile of wood. Saul stood in the dark for some time, staring toward the coffin. When Edmond called him, the old dog did not come. When Edmond cursed him, he lowered his head but remained where he was.

At last Edmond stood, took two steps toward him, and lifted the whip.

Saul came then, not to the sled but to the fire, and lay with his back to Edmond and his eyes still turned toward the coffin.

"You see?" Father Nicholas said.

"I see dogs."

"They are afraid."

"They are always afraid of something. Wolves. Hunger. Whip. Shadows. Dead men."

"Do dogs fear dead men?"

Edmond took another drink.

"Depends on the dead man."

They ate bacon fried in a pan blackened by many fires, hard biscuit softened in coffee, and beans heated badly because Edmond had no patience for them. Father Nicholas ate little. The cold had worked deep into him, and fatigue had made his body feel both heavy and hollow.

Edmond ate with appetite, then drank again.

The bottle moved in and out of his coat until his speech thickened and his eyes brightened strangely in the firelight. He did not become merry. Some men, drinking, made a poor imitation of happiness. Edmond seemed only to grow more completely himself.

"Black Mercy Ridge," he said once, without prompting.

Father Nicholas looked up.

The trapper sat with his back against a spruce trunk, rifle across his knees.

"You know it?" the priest asked.

"Everyone knows it."

"Not everyone has been there."

Edmond's mouth twisted.

"No."

"Have you?"

The question hung in the cold.

For a while there was only the crackle of the fire and the faint creak of the coffin ropes as the sled settled in the snow.

Edmond drank.

"A man hears stories."

"I asked if you had been there."

"I heard you."

"And?"

"And you ask too much."

Father Nicholas did not press him. Not then.

Later, when the fire had burned lower and the trees had grown into a wall around them, Edmond became restless. He threw another branch on the coals, though they had little wood to spare. Sparks rushed upward and vanished.

"Five fools," he said.

Father Nicholas had been half asleep, sitting with his shoulders hunched and his hands tucked under his arms for warmth. His eyes opened.

"What?"

Edmond stared at the fire.

"Five fools go north. One thinks he knows the ridge. One thinks he knows gold. One thinks he knows God. One thinks he knows men. One knows nothing and says the most."

"Who were they?"

The trapper smiled vaguely, but there was no humor in it.

"Hungry men."

Father Nicholas sat straighter.

"Was this a party near Black Mercy Ridge?"

Edmond's head turned slightly toward him. For a moment his eyes cleared, and in them was such hatred that the priest felt he had stepped too close to a hidden pit.

Then Edmond looked away.

"Sleep, Father."

"What happened to them?"

"The North happened."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer worth anything."

He drank again, spilling some into his beard.

The dogs began to growl.

All four had lifted their heads. Not toward the trees, as they would have done for wolf scent. Not toward the creek. Toward the sled.

The coffin lay in darkness beyond the fire's reach, its shape a deeper black against the snow.

Pike whined.

Jar stood.

Saul showed his teeth without making a sound.

Then Jar lunged backward.

It happened so fast that Father Nicholas did not understand it at first. The black dog threw his weight against the trace line, twisting with all the panic in his lean body. The line snapped where it had been worn near the collar. Edmond shouted and lunged for him, but Jar was already away. He passed the edge of the firelight in two bounds and vanished into the spruce.

"Damn that dog!" Edmond roared.

He snatched up the rifle and ran three steps after him, then stopped.

The darkness beyond camp had already taken the animal. There was no sound of running now. No crashing brush. No bark. Nothing.

Only the wind.

Edmond stood listening, rifle in hand.

"Will he come back?" Father Nicholas asked.

"If he wants meat."

"And if not?"

“Then something else gets meat.”

He returned to the fire, but he did not sit down for a long while. He stood with the rifle crooked in one arm and the bottle in the other, staring at the place where Jar had disappeared. The remaining dogs lay close to one another now. Saul had stopped growling. Nettle trembled.

Father Nicholas looked toward the coffin.

The ropes were still.

The lid was still.

Everything was still.

They slept poorly.

Edmond slept first, or seemed to. He lay with his back to the fire and the rifle under one hand. The bottle, nearly empty, had slipped from his fingers into the snow. Twice he muttered in his sleep. Once he said a name Father Nicholas did not know.

“Pike,” perhaps.

Or “Rusk.”

The priest remained awake longer, praying without opening his book. He prayed for Silas Vane, though the man’s death troubled him less than the fear on his face. He prayed for Will Brown, though the dead man had refused confession. He prayed for John Walters, for the Vane sons somewhere out in the cold, for Mary Creek, for himself. After a time the words blurred and became less prayer than endurance.

He woke before dawn to a sound like wood knocking softly against wood.

His eyes opened at once.

The fire was low. Blue-black morning waited between the trees. Edmond lay asleep or pretending to sleep. The three dogs were awake, all staring toward the sled.

There was no second knock.

Father Nicholas rose slowly. His legs ached from the cold. He walked to the fire and put on the last of the night wood, then turned toward the sled.

Something lay beside the coffin.

At first he thought a fold of canvas had come loose. Then the pale light grew by a shade, and he saw the black fur, the stiff legs, the head drawn back against the shoulder.

Jar had returned.

The dog lay frozen beside the coffin, pressed so close to the sled runner that one foreleg touched the wood. His mouth was open, showing white teeth. His eyes were filmed with frost. The broken trace line dragged behind him, stiff as a stick.

Father Nicholas stood over him and said nothing.

Edmond came up behind him a moment later.

For once, the trapper did not curse.

He looked at the dead dog, then at the tracks. There were Jar's tracks entering camp from the spruce. They came straight to the sled. There were no other tracks beside them.

"What killed him?" Father Nicholas asked.

"Cold."

"He came back to the coffin."

"He came back to camp."

"He is lying against the coffin."

Edmond bent, gripped Jar by the hind legs, and dragged him away with a violence that made the frozen body scrape against the snow.

"He is lying where he dropped."

The priest watched him.

"You believe that?"

Edmond straightened. His face in the morning light was gray and sour from drink.

"I believe I have one dog less."

"What will you do with him?"

"Leave him."

Father Nicholas looked toward the animal.

"He served you."

"He broke trace."

"He was frightened."

"He was a dog."

The words were hard, but Edmond did not meet the priest's eyes when he said them.

They ate quickly and in silence. Edmond gave no portion to the dead dog, no gesture of farewell, no curse. He cut Jar's broken trace free and rearranged the harness for three. Pike seemed lost without his brother, looking repeatedly toward the stiff body under the spruce. Saul snapped at him once, and Pike lowered his head.

The sled was harder to move with three dogs.

Edmond took the gee-pole and pushed. Father Nicholas put his shoulder to the rear despite being told not to. Together with the dogs they broke the runners free and dragged the coffin north.

The second day was colder.

It was not the clean bright cold of high winter, but a damp, mean cold that seemed to come upward from the frozen creek. The sky stayed low. No sun broke through. Snow began once, fine as ash, and ended without covering their tracks.

They left the creek near noon and climbed into higher timber.

Here the land changed.

The spruce grew old. Their trunks were thicker, their branches dead lower down, their tops crowded so closely that little light reached the ground. The snow beneath them was shallow in places and deep in others without reason. Fallen trees lay hidden under smooth white humps, and more than once Father Nicholas plunged to the knee where he had thought the way firm.

Edmond found the route without hesitation.

That, more than anything, told against him.

He did not search for trail. He did not stop at uncertain places and cast about for old signs. He moved as a man moves in a room he knows in darkness. A turn around a boulder, a climb between two leaning trees, a descent into a narrow hollow where no ordinary traveler would have thought to go. Always he chose before the land forced choice.

Then Father Nicholas saw the first marker.

It was cut into the trunk of a dead spruce, high enough to remain visible above most winter snows. The bark had closed around it with age, but the wound still showed: two slashes crossing at an angle.

Not a natural mark.

Axe work.

Father Nicholas stopped.

Edmond went on five paces before noticing.

“What now?”

The priest pointed.

“Who made that?”

Edmond’s eyes moved to the tree and away again.

“Old trapper.”

“Which old trapper?”

“How would I know?”

“You knew this way without looking.”

“I know country.”

“This country?”

“All country looks the same if you live long enough.”

Father Nicholas brushed snow from the scar with one mitten. The wood beneath was dark, hardened by years.

“It is old.”

“Then the man who made it is likely dead.”

“Was this a trapping line?”

“Maybe.”

“Whose?”

Edmond’s jaw tightened.

“Do you want names for every stump too?”

The priest turned from the tree.

“I want the truth.”

"That is a poor want in the North."

They continued.

More marks appeared as the afternoon wore on.

Not many. Not enough to guide a stranger easily. But once Father Nicholas had seen the first, his eyes found the others. A blaze nearly swallowed by bark. A notch cut into the side of a leaning tamarack. Three small chops on a spruce beside a narrow rise. Some were so old they seemed part of the tree's illness rather than a man's work. Others had been cut deep and deliberate.

Each time Edmond pretended not to notice until Father Nicholas looked at him.

By late afternoon, the priest said, "You have been here before."

Edmond did not slow.

"Yes."

The admission surprised him.

"You said you had not."

"I said no such thing."

"You let us believe it."

"You believe what comforts you."

"When were you here?"

Edmond walked on.

"With whom?"

No answer.

"Was Silas Vane with you?"

At that, Edmond stopped.

The dogs stopped too, grateful and panting. The coffin came to rest between them, the ropes creaking in the cold.

Edmond turned.

His face had darkened.

"You keep his name out of this timber."

"Why?"

"Because he is dead."

"By Will Brown's hand."

"By a knife in Harland's room."

"After calling him Rusk."

The name seemed to pass through the trees.

Pike whined.

Edmond stepped close to Father Nicholas.

"You listen to me, priest. You got your Bible and your dead man and your duty. Fine. Keep them. But this is my trail. My dogs. My rifle. You ask questions when I allow it."

Father Nicholas held his ground, though his heart had quickened.

“And if I do not?”

Edmond smiled with one side of his mouth.

“Then you will learn how big this country is when a man walks it alone.”

The priest said nothing.

Edmond turned away first.

They made camp before full dark in a hollow ringed by black spruce. No creek ran nearby, so Edmond melted snow for water. He worked with short, angry motions and spoke only to the dogs. Pike refused food until Edmond struck the pan with a stick. Saul ate his portion and tried to take Nettle's. The gray bitch snapped at him, and for a moment the two dogs fought in a savage knot before Edmond kicked them apart.

“Everything is sour,” he muttered.

He drank before supper.

He drank after supper.

By the time the fire had settled low, he had gone from anger into a kind of bleak talkativeness. His words came slowly, then stopped, then came again in fragments. Father Nicholas listened without seeming to listen.

“Men think starving makes them honest,” Edmond said.

He sat with his knees drawn up, bottle hanging between his hands.

“It doesn't.”

The priest looked across the fire.

“No?”

“It makes them clever first. Then mean. Then small. A man can get so small he can crawl through any hole in himself.”

“Were you starving once?”

Edmond laughed.

“Once.”

“With the lost party?”

The trapper stared into the flames.

“Lost,” he said. “That's a town word.”

“What word would you use?”

“Gone.”

“Who were they?”

Edmond's lips moved. He counted something with his thumb against each finger.

“Five went,” he murmured.

The hair rose along Father Nicholas's neck.

“Five?”

“Five went north.”

The priest waited.

For a long while Edmond said nothing. His head sank forward. The bottle nearly slipped from his hand.

Then he spoke again, so low the words seemed not meant for the living.

"Two came home."

The fire cracked sharply.

Edmond flinched as if struck. His eyes lifted and fixed on the darkness beyond Father Nicholas.

"Don't stand there," he said.

The priest turned.

There was nothing among the trees.

"Who are you speaking to?"

Edmond's face had changed. The drunken looseness had gone out of it, replaced by a childlike alarm that did not belong on such a hard man.

"I said don't stand there."

Father Nicholas rose slowly.

The dogs were awake. Nettle had pressed herself flat to the snow. Pike trembled. Saul stared into the trees with his teeth bared.

"What do you see?" the priest asked.

Edmond shook his head once, then again.

"No fire for you," he whispered. "You had your share."

"Edmond."

The trapper hurled the bottle into the darkness.

It struck a tree and broke.

At once the spell, if spell it was, seemed to break with it. Edmond blinked, looked at the priest, then at the dogs. Shame or rage passed over his face. He snatched up his blanket and rolled onto his side with his back to the fire.

"Sleep," he said hoarsely.

Father Nicholas did not.

He sat awake long after Edmond's breathing grew heavy. He watched the place in the trees where the trapper had looked. Nothing moved there. No face appeared. No dead man stepped into the firelight.

Yet the priest could not shake the feeling that the darkness had weight in that place, as though someone stood just beyond sight and waited with patience learned in snow.

The next morning, Edmond remembered enough to be dangerous.

His eyes were bloodshot. His hands shook when he tied the harness, though whether from cold, drink, or memory, Father Nicholas could not say. He spoke to the dogs harshly and struck Saul once for no clear reason.

The priest waited until they had eaten and the fire had been kicked apart.

"Last night," he said.

Edmond did not look up.

"What of it?"

"You spoke of a party."

"No."

"You said five went north."

"I said nothing."

"You said two came home."

Edmond pulled a knot tight enough to make Pike yelp.

"You heard whiskey."

"I heard you."

Now Edmond stood.

The morning was still dim. Frost clung to his beard. His face was pale under the weathering, and there was something unsteady in his eyes that made him more dangerous, not less.

"You ask that again," he said, "and I leave you."

Father Nicholas said nothing.

"I mean it. I'll cut the dogs loose, take what food I can carry, and leave you with your coffin and your holy book. You can pray yourself warm. You can preach to the trees. Maybe your dead man will show you the way."

The priest's voice was quiet.

"You would abandon me?"

"In a breath."

"That is murder."

"No," Edmond said. "That is the North."

They stood facing one another across the ashes of the dead fire.

Father Nicholas understood then that the journey had changed. Until that morning, he had believed himself a burden Edmond disliked but would carry because he had been paid. Now he saw that payment was a thin rope, and fear a knife already touching it.

He could not force Edmond north.

He could not return alone.

He could not leave the dead man unburied.

So he said only, "I will ask no more this morning."

Edmond smiled without victory.

"You will ask no more at all."

He turned to the team and lifted the whip.

The dogs leaned into their traces. The sled moved. The coffin followed.

Behind them, under the spruce, Jar's body lay a day south beside the cold remains of their first fire. Ahead, old marks waited in older trees, leading them toward country Edmond Smith did not wish to remember and Will Brown had crossed death to find.

Chapter 7: Remains of the Camp

By the third day, maps would have been of no use even if they had carried one.

The country had ceased to offer shapes a man might name. There were ridges, but they rose and fell without order. There were hollows, but the snow filled them until they seemed level ground. There were creeks under the ice, but they did not announce themselves until a dog's foot broke through or the sled runner groaned over hollow water. The timber thickened, thinned, and thickened again, and always beyond it lay more timber, black and patient.

Father Nicholas had no longer any true sense of direction. He knew only that they had come north, then east, then north again, according to Edmond's choosing. The sky did not help. It had remained a low iron lid since morning. No sun showed behind it. No wind moved strongly enough to clear the air, yet the cold pressed harder hour by hour, entering the priest through boots, sleeves, beard, and bone.

Edmond Smith moved like a man being pulled by a chain.

He had stopped boasting of the trail. He had stopped cursing the dogs except when they forced him to. He drank often now, not in long draughts but in small, angry swallows, as if the whiskey were medicine he hated but required. His face had changed since leaving Mary Creek. The hard confidence was still there in pieces, but something worked beneath it, splitting it from within. He looked behind him too often. He looked at trees as though he expected them to speak. Once he halted the sled and stood listening to nothing for so long that Father Nicholas asked whether he had heard wolves.

"No wolves here," Edmond said.

"Why not?"

The trapper did not answer.

They went on.

Near midday the old trail markers became clearer. Not fresher, but more frequent. A double blaze on a dead spruce. A split branch bent and grown into the trunk beside it. Three axe marks on a fir so old the wood had blackened in the wounds. Here and there, broken stumps showed under the snow where men had cut firewood long ago. No ordinary eye would have followed those signs, but Edmond followed them without searching.

At last the timber changed.

The spruce opened into a shallow basin beneath a long black ridge. It rose beyond the trees like the back of some buried animal, dark stone showing through blown snow along its crown. Nothing moved on it. Nothing called from it. The place had such stillness that even the dogs slowed before Edmond told them to.

Father Nicholas knew without being told that they had reached the country Will Brown had named.

Black Mercy Ridge.

Or near enough to it that the name mattered.

The basin held the remains of a camp.

At first the priest saw only irregularities under snow: a low mound, a leaning post, the black ribs of something half-buried. Then the shapes arranged themselves into human ruin. A small cabin stood near the edge of the trees, though stood was too generous a word. Its roof had collapsed inward, breaking the walls apart. One corner remained upright, with moss and snow packed between the old logs. The doorway gaped blackly. The door itself lay flat beneath drift, one iron hinge still fastened to it like a broken limb.

Around the cabin, the dead camp waited.

Rusted traps hung from trees.

They had been left there so long that the bark had begun to swell around their chains. Some hung open-jawed. Some were sprung. One dangled from a branch with the bones of a small animal still caught in it, polished brown by weather and time. Another had fallen and lay half-buried in the snow, its teeth showing through like something that had tried to bite its way up from the ground.

A broken sled lay near the lower end of the basin, partly under ice where spring melt must have gathered and frozen year after year. One runner stuck out at an angle. The crosspieces were split. A length of old rope trailed from it into the ice, visible in places under cloudy thickness.

Near the cabin was a fire pit.

Snow had filled it, but charred stones showed through where the wind had worried the drift away. Beyond it lay scattered things the camp had not swallowed completely: a rusted pan, the head of an axe without its handle, a tin cup flattened under something heavy, a strip of leather, the iron ring from a dog harness.

And bones.

At first Father Nicholas thought they were animal bones. There were enough of those in any camp that had died badly. Long ribs, a jaw, pieces of leg, small scattered fragments dragged and cleaned by foxes or birds. But as he walked nearer, he saw one bone lying half out of the snow beside the ruined cabin wall, and something in the shape of it stopped him.

He had buried too many men not to know.

Not all of the bones were animal.

The dogs knew it too.

Nettle would go no farther. She sank into the snow and refused the trace. Pike stood stiff with his tail tucked and made a thin whining sound deep in his throat. Saul, who had bullied the others for two days, did not growl. He stared

toward the collapsed cabin with his yellow eyes and trembled so slightly that Father Nicholas might not have noticed if the harness rings had not clicked.

Edmond struck the snow with the whip.

“Up.”

The dogs did not move.

He struck again, closer.

“Up, damn you.”

Saul bared his teeth, not at Edmond but at the cabin.

Father Nicholas stepped forward.

“Enough.”

Edmond turned on him with a face so drawn and pale that the priest almost failed to recognize the man from Mary Creek.

“Do not tell me about my dogs.”

“They will not go in.”

“They will go where I put them.”

“No,” Father Nicholas said. “Not here.”

For a moment it seemed Edmond would use the whip on him. Then the trapper’s hand dropped. He looked suddenly weary, old in a way that had nothing to do with years.

“They remember better than men,” he muttered.

“What?”

But Edmond had already turned away.

They made camp at the edge of the basin, not within it. Edmond refused to take the sled closer to the cabin. He unhitched the dogs and tied them beneath a stand of spruce where they could not see the ruins clearly. Father Nicholas helped gather deadwood, though there was little of it dry enough to burn. Every branch seemed wet with ancient cold. The fire, when Edmond finally coaxed it alive, burned low and sullen, producing more smoke than heat.

The coffin remained on the sled.

It faced the camp.

Father Nicholas noticed this only after the fire was made. The sled had come to rest in such a position that the coffin lay pointing toward the collapsed cabin and the ridge beyond it. Edmond had not arranged it deliberately, or had not seemed to. Yet when the priest suggested turning the sled to shelter it from the wind, Edmond refused.

“Leave it.”

“Why?”

“Because it wants to look.”

The words were out before he could stop them.

Father Nicholas looked at him.

Edmond looked away.

The silence in the basin was not ordinary silence. The northern wilderness was often quiet, but never empty. There was always a branch settling under snow, ice speaking under pressure, wind worrying at needles, some small animal moving unseen beneath crust or brush. Here there was nothing. The sound of their own fire seemed rude and temporary. Their breathing seemed too loud. Even the dogs had stopped whining.

After they had eaten a little, Father Nicholas walked toward the ruined cabin.

Edmond watched him go but did not follow at once.

The priest stepped carefully. The snow hid holes and old debris. Near the fire pit he stopped to examine the bones. Some had been gnawed. Some had cracked in the cold. He found part of a boot heel, black and hard as stone. Near it lay what might have been the remains of a mitten, or the rotted cuff of a sleeve.

Behind the cabin, he found the tree.

It was a spruce thicker than the others, dead on one side, living on the other. Its lower branches had been cut away long ago. About four feet above the ground, the bark bore deep horizontal scars, not axe marks, not animal damage. They circled partway around the trunk, worn into the wood before the tree had grown over them.

Rope marks.

Father Nicholas stood before them a long while.

The snow lay smooth around the roots.

He did not touch the tree.

Edmond came up behind him. The priest heard his steps and smelled whiskey before he spoke.

"Don't."

"I said nothing."

"Then keep at it."

Father Nicholas turned.

"This is where someone was tied."

Edmond's eyes flicked to the marks and then away.

"Could be."

"No animal made those."

"No."

"A man, then."

"Yes, Father. A man. Men tie things. Dogs. Sleds. Meat. Other men, when needed."

"When was it needed here?"

Edmond laughed once, but the sound had no strength.

"You have a grand gift for asking what you already know."

"I know very little."

"That is why you are still alive."

The priest looked back at the tree.

"Was Caleb Rusk tied here?"

The name moved between them like a hand passing over a flame.

Edmond went very still.

Then he stepped close, close enough that Father Nicholas could see the broken red lines in his eyes.

"You do not say that name here."

"Why?"

"Because the dead might answer."

He turned and walked back to the fire.

That evening came early, though in that basin it seemed no true day had entered. The ridge blackened first, then the cabin, then the trees. Snow began to fall straight down in fine dry grains. It made no sound when it landed. The ruined camp slowly blurred, not enough to disappear, only enough to seem uncertain.

Edmond drank.

Father Nicholas watched him from across the fire and said nothing.

There was a time to question a man and a time to let the question ripen in him until he could no longer hold it back. Edmond had reached that second time. The whiskey brought color into his face and loosened his mouth, but it did not make him drunk in the common way. He did not boast, sing, curse, or laugh. Instead, he sat hunched over the fire, bottle between both hands, speaking now and then as though continuing a conversation already long underway.

"Five men," he said.

The priest waited.

Edmond looked toward the coffin.

"Five men and six dogs. That was all."

Father Nicholas did not move.

"Who were they?"

The trapper's lips worked around the names. He did not want to say them, and because he did not want to, he said them roughly.

"Me. Silas Vane. Caleb Rusk. George Red. Connor McLane."

The fire cracked.

Snow fell between them and hissed softly where it touched the coals.

"Prospectors?" Father Nicholas asked.

"Hunters too. Trappers when we had traps. Starving men by the end. Men call themselves what weather lets them."

"When was this?"

"Years."

"How many?"

“Enough.”

The priest let the answer stand.

Edmond wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His gaze had gone unfocused, fixed somewhere beyond the fire, beyond the coffin, perhaps beyond the years.

“We were meant to be out six weeks. Maybe eight if sign was good. Silas had word of a creek beyond the ridge. Said there was gold in it, or enough color to make a man come back with more men. He always had word of something. That was Silas. Could smell profit in another man’s dream.”

“And you followed him.”

“We all did.”

“Why?”

Edmond looked at him sharply.

“Because we were young enough to think luck had been waiting for us.”

He drank again.

“The weather came wrong. Early. Heavy. Not like this.” He waved one hand at the quiet snow. “Worse. Snow that buried firewood. Wind that took tracks five minutes after you made them. Ice where there should have been water, water where there should have been ice. Every day cost more than it gave. We miscounted the country. Miscounted the cold. Miscounted what men eat when they work hard and sleep frozen.”

“You ran short of supplies.”

“We ran short of everything.”

The dogs stirred under the trees. Saul lifted his head and then settled again.

“We had six dogs,” Edmond said. “Good dogs. Better than men, mostly. Three froze.”

“Froze?”

“That is what I said.”

Father Nicholas did not challenge him, though he heard something in the word that sounded rehearsed.

“After that, we had three dogs left, and five men half-starved. Three dogs cannot haul five men and gear out of country like this. Not in deep snow. Not with the weather turning. So we walked more. Ate less. Cut load. Threw away what we thought we could live without. Then threw away what we could not.”

“Why not turn back sooner?”

Edmond gave him a look of contempt sharpened by pain.

“Every fool in the North says that after. Turn back sooner. Eat less sooner. Leave sooner. Shoot sooner. Men do not know it is too late until it has been too late for days.”

He bent forward and fed a stick into the fire. Sparks rose and vanished.

“Silas kept the common sack.”

“The food?”

“What was left of it. Flour. Beans. Bacon hard as wood. Coffee. A little sugar George Red had hidden and then surrendered when Connor found it. Silas kept it because he was the oldest and the largest and because he said order would keep us alive.”

“And did it?”

Edmond smiled.

“No.”

He looked again toward the coffin.

“Caleb saw him.”

Father Nicholas said nothing.

“Middle of the night. Fire near gone. Snow coming through the roof there.” He pointed at the ruined cabin, or what remained of it. “We were in that shack then, all of us breathing smoke and rot and hunger. Caleb woke and saw Silas with his hand in the common sack.”

“Stealing?”

“That is what Caleb said.”

“And was he?”

The trapper’s eyes flashed.

“I am telling it.”

“Yes.”

“I am telling what happened.”

“Then tell it.”

Edmond swallowed. The bottle trembled slightly in his hand.

“Caleb went at him. Not shouting at first. Quiet. Worse that way. He said Silas had been shaving portions for days. Said that was why he was stronger. Said he would count the sack before morning and divide what Silas stole. Silas told him to lie down. Caleb called him thief.”

“What did the others do?”

“George woke. Connor too. I was already awake.”

“Why?”

Edmond’s face closed for a moment.

“Cold.”

He drank.

“Caleb put hands on Silas. That was his mistake. Silas was big even then. Not old like you saw him. Big and quick enough. They went into each other like dogs over meat. George tried to pull Caleb back. Connor shouted. I got up. Someone kicked the fire apart and the room went half dark. There was blood before I knew whose it was.”

The priest looked toward the collapsed cabin.

“And then?”

“Then we tied Caleb.”

“To that tree?”

Edmond's mouth tightened.

"Yes."

"Why outside?"

"Because he had gone mad."

"Mad?"

"Hunger takes men different. Some weep. Some pray. Some steal. Caleb turned on us. Said Silas had killed us already. Said none of us would leave if Silas chose. Said he would cut the sack open and scatter it before letting Silas keep charge. He went for the knife again."

"Again?"

Edmond stared at him.

"I said he went for the knife."

"No," Father Nicholas said quietly. "You said again."

The trapper's face darkened.

"Do not play court with me."

"I am trying to understand."

"You are trying to catch me."

"I am trying to hear the truth."

Edmond laughed, but this time it broke near the end.

"Truth. Here."

He looked around at the ruined camp, the dead traps, the broken sled, the bones under snow.

"You think truth lives clean in a place like this? You think men freeze and starve and remember like priests writing in books? We tied him because he would have killed us. We tied him until morning. That was all."

"Did morning come?"

The question seemed to strike him.

For a long while he did not answer.

The snow continued falling. It had begun to gather on the coffin lid in a thin pale sheet.

"Storm came," Edmond said at last.

His voice was lower now.

"A bad one. You have never heard wind like that. Cabin roof started to go. Dogs screaming. Snow coming under the logs. Silas said we had to move or die there. Connor said we could not leave Caleb tied."

"And did you?"

Edmond closed his eyes.

"Silas said Caleb would be dead by then anyway."

"Was he?"

"I don't know."

Father Nicholas leaned forward.

"Was he alive when you left?"

"I said I don't know."

"But you saw him?"

Edmond opened his eyes. They were wet, though not with tears alone; the cold and smoke had reddened them raw.

"He was quiet."

"That is not the same."

"He was quiet."

Father Nicholas looked toward the rope-marked tree. In the falling snow, it seemed nearer than before.

"You left him there."

"We had three dogs for four men by then."

"Four?"

Edmond's gaze snapped back to him.

The priest's own words returned to him. Five men. Caleb tied. That left four.

"George Red," Father Nicholas said. "Connor McLane. You. Silas. Four men."

Edmond stared into the fire.

"Yes."

"And all four left?"

The trapper's jaw worked.

"Yes."

"Yet two came home."

The fire hissed.

Somewhere in the ruined cabin, snow shifted and slid from a broken beam. Both men turned at the sound. The dogs lifted their heads.

When nothing followed, Edmond bent for the bottle, found it nearly empty, and finished it.

"Enough."

"What happened to George and Connor?"

"Enough."

"Were they buried?"

Edmond stood too quickly and swayed. His hand went to the rifle, then fell away. For a moment Father Nicholas saw not the violent man of Harland's Trading House, nor the guide who had bullied dogs and mayor alike, but a young man trapped in some old white room with no door.

"I told you enough," Edmond said.

His voice was hoarse.

"I told you what a priest needs. Caleb Rusk turned on us. Silas stole, maybe. Maybe he didn't. Hunger lies through every mouth. There was a fight. Caleb was tied. Storm came. Men ran because men want to live. That is the whole of it."

"No," Father Nicholas said.

Edmond's eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"That is not the whole of it."

The trapper stepped around the fire.

"You be careful."

"There are bones here."

"There are bones everywhere."

"Not all animal."

"Then say words over them. That is what you do."

"George Red and Connor McLane did not come home."

"No."

"Why?"

Edmond was close now. The firelight moved over his face and made it look torn between anger and terror.

"Because the North took them."

"How?"

"The way it takes men."

Father Nicholas did not look away.

"And Caleb Rusk?"

Edmond's lips drew back from his teeth.

"The North should have taken him too."

The words came out with such hatred, and such fear beneath the hatred, that for a moment neither man spoke after them.

Then, from the sled, there came a sound.

Not a knock.

Not yet.

Only the faint creak of rope tightening in the cold.

Both men turned.

The coffin lay under its new dusting of snow. Nothing moved upon it. Nothing moved near it. Yet the ropes that held it had grown taut enough to sing softly when the wind touched them.

Edmond backed away from the fire.

Father Nicholas rose.

The trapper pointed at him with a shaking hand.

"No more questions."

"Edmond—"

"No more. I told you his name. I told you why he killed Silas. I told you where this place is. That is the end of it."

"It is not the end for him."

Edmond gave a short, cracked laugh.

"He had his end yesterday morning."

“No,” Father Nicholas said, looking at the coffin. “I do not think he did.”

Snow fell steadily over the ruined camp. It covered the bones, softened the collapsed roof, whitened the rusted traps, and filled slowly, grain by grain, the old scars around the tree where a man had once been tied.

Near Black Mercy Ridge, in country beyond the use of maps, the dead waited beneath it.

And beside the fire, Edmond Smith sat down again with his empty bottle in his hands and stared into the flames as if something in them had begun to stare back.

Chapter 8: Edmond's Confession

Night settled over the old camp as though it had been waiting there all along.

The fire gave little comfort. It burned low and red beneath a blackening crust of ash, its smoke crawling close to the ground before losing itself among the ruined cabin, the hanging traps, and the trees. Snow continued to fall without wind. It came down straight and fine and patient, covering the bones, the broken sled, the rusted iron, the old marks in the bark, and the coffin lashed upon the runners.

Father Nicholas sat with his coat drawn tight and his hands held toward the coals.

Across from him, Edmond Smith stared into the fire with the empty whiskey bottle between his boots.

The trapper had said nothing for nearly an hour. After his telling of the old party, after the names and the half-truths and the anger that followed them, he had gone into himself. His face had grown slack in places and tight in others. More than once his lips moved without sound. More than once he looked toward the collapsed cabin as though a man had called from inside it.

The dogs had not slept.

Nettle lay with her head flat on her paws and her eyes open. Pike sat upright, trembling. Saul stood at the end of his tether, stiff-legged and silent, his gaze fixed not on the timber but on the open space between the cabin and the rope-scarred tree.

Father Nicholas noticed this and followed the dog's stare.

There was nothing there.

Only falling snow.

Only the black shape of the tree.

Only the ruined cabin, its broken roof sagging inward like an old wound.

Then Saul began to growl.

It was not the ordinary growl of a dog scenting wolf or man. It was low, uncertain, almost unwilling. The sound seemed dragged out of him against his own judgment. Nettle answered it with a thin whine. Pike tried to back away, but the tether held him.

Edmond lifted his head.

"What is it?" Father Nicholas asked.

The trapper did not answer.

His face had changed.

All the blood seemed to have gone from it. His mouth opened slightly. His eyes were fixed past the priest, past the fire, toward the cabin.

Father Nicholas turned again.

This time he saw a man walking between the trees.

At first the priest thought the falling snow had shaped itself into a figure, as snow and darkness sometimes do when a tired mind wishes to be afraid. Then the figure moved. It came slowly out from the side of the ruined cabin and crossed the open ground where the old fire pit lay buried. It walked with the stiff, uncertain steps of a man who had not used his limbs in some time.

It wore a coat Father Nicholas knew.

The same worn coat that had lain inside the coffin.

Will Brown walked through the snow.

But not as he had walked into Mary Creek. Not tall, controlled, and terrible in his silence. This figure's head hung wrong upon its neck. It leaned slightly to one side, as if the rope from the hanging tree still pulled it. The face was pale beneath the beard. The eyes were dark hollows. Snow gathered on the shoulders and did not melt.

Edmond made a sound like a man choking.

"No."

The figure stopped beside the rope-marked tree.

Its head lifted with a broken motion.

Edmond scrambled backward, kicking snow into the fire. Sparks burst upward. The dogs threw themselves against their tethers. Saul snarled now, but he did not lunge.

"No," Edmond said again. "You are in the box."

The figure did not answer.

"You are in the box," Edmond whispered.

Father Nicholas turned toward the sled.

The coffin lay as before, lashed down beneath its white covering of snow.

Still.

Closed.

Impossible.

When he looked back, the figure had moved closer.

Edmond snatched up his rifle.

"Stay there!"

His voice cracked across the basin.

The figure kept coming.

Its boots made no sound in the snow.

Edmond fired.

The shot shattered the silence of the camp. The flash lit the cabin, the trees, the coffin, the dead traps hanging in their branches. Snow leapt from a spruce trunk behind the figure where the bullet struck.

Will Brown did not fall.

He had not even paused.

The rifle slid from Edmond's hands.

Father Nicholas rose, though his legs felt weak beneath him. He tried to speak a prayer, but the words came apart in his mouth. The figure was nearer now, and with it came cold so deep it seemed older than winter. The fire bent away from it. The flames shrank blue. The snow around the rope-marked tree darkened as though something beneath it had thawed.

Then Brown stopped.

He stood between the fire and the old tree.

His head hung to one side. His dead eyes were not on Father Nicholas.

They were on Edmond.

The trapper covered his face with both hands.

"I told him," Edmond said. "I told him not to."

His voice was no longer the voice of the man who had threatened the mayor in Harland's Trading House. It was small, broken, and very young.

"I told Silas not to."

The dead man raised one hand.

He pointed toward the ruined cabin.

The world changed.

Father Nicholas had known visions in fever rooms and dying rooms, or believed he had. He had sat beside men whose last breaths carried them partly out of the world before the body was done. He had seen eyes fixed on things invisible to others. He had heard names spoken by the dying that no living person present had known. But never had the veil been torn open before him as it was then.

The old camp rose whole around him.

Not whole as in life, but whole as memory.

The collapsed roof lifted in darkness and became a roof again, low and smoke-blackened. The walls closed. The fire pit burned with a poor yellow flame. Wind screamed against the logs and drove snow through cracks in the chinking. Five men sat inside the cabin, gaunt as famine itself.

Silas Vane was there, younger, broader, his beard black and heavy with frost. Edmond Smith sat near him, not yet the hard man of Mary Creek, but near enough to be recognized. Caleb Rusk stood by the door, lean, hollow-cheeked, with fever-bright eyes. George Red lay wrapped in a blanket near the fire, his red hair showing under a torn cap. Connor McLane knelt over a sack of supplies, counting with shaking hands.

Six dogs screamed outside in the storm.

No.

Three dogs screamed.

The others were already gone.

Father Nicholas saw hunger in the cabin like a sixth man. It sat between them. It looked out of their eyes. It had thinned their faces, sharpened their teeth, and turned every glance toward the common sack.

Connor McLane lifted the sack and looked at Silas.

"There was more."

Silas said nothing.

George Red pushed himself up on one elbow.

"He's right."

Silas's hand moved toward his knife.

The vision shifted.

Now George Red was on his knees.

Silas stood over him.

Edmond held Connor back.

Caleb Rusk shouted something Father Nicholas could not hear over the wind. Then there was a flash of steel, a wet sound, and George Red fell forward onto the cabin floor.

The vision shifted again.

Connor McLane tried to run.

He made it as far as the door.

Edmond caught him.

Not Silas.

Edmond.

The priest saw Edmond's younger hands close around Connor's coat. Saw the two men struggle in the blowing snow outside. Saw Silas come after them with the knife. Saw Connor turn once toward Caleb Rusk with such pleading in his face that Father Nicholas felt the force of it years later and staggered beneath it.

Then Connor went down too.

The dogs screamed louder.

The vision shifted again.

Caleb Rusk stood with his back to the rope-scarred tree.

His hands were tied behind it.

Blood ran from a cut above his eye and froze in a dark line along his cheek. He was shouting now. Father Nicholas could hear him.

"Murderers!"

Silas struck him across the mouth.

Caleb spat blood into the snow.

"You'll hang for this."

Silas laughed.

"No court here."

Caleb looked past him, to Edmond.

"You saw."

Edmond would not meet his eyes.

"You saw it," Caleb said. "You helped him."

Silas pulled the rope tighter. Edmond tied the knot.

That was the worst of it. Not Silas, with his knife and his great brutal certainty. Edmond tying the knot. Edmond's hands working carefully, skillfully, making sure the witness would not free himself.

The vision shifted again.

Silas and Edmond loaded the sled.

They took the supply sack.

They took the furs.

They took the rifle.

They left George Red and Connor McLane under snow that had already begun to cover them.

They left Caleb Rusk bound to the tree.

The three remaining dogs strained in their harness while the storm bent the spruce nearly to the ground. Caleb shouted until his voice broke. Then he shouted no more, but his eyes followed them as the sled moved away.

Edmond looked back once.

Only once.

Father Nicholas saw what he had seen.

Caleb Rusk still alive.

The vision did not end there.

The storm deepened. Night came. Wolves moved between the trees, gray backs appearing and vanishing through the snow. They circled the camp first. Then the tree. Caleb twisted against the rope until the skin tore at his wrists. Blood marked the bark. His boots kicked trenches in the snow. The wolves came nearer.

One lunged.

Then another.

The vision became broken.

Teeth.

Snow.

Blood on rope.

A hand tearing free.

A man crawling.

Caleb Rusk did not die at the tree.

Or not all of him did.

He crawled away from the wolves, or through them, or after they had taken what they wanted and left what they did not understand. Father Nicholas saw him dragging himself over the snow with one arm, leaving a dark trail behind him. He saw him reach the broken sled. He saw him vanish into a hollow beyond the camp where the snow blew over him until he was gone.

Then years passed in an instant.

A man with rope scars on his wrists walked out of the northern country.

He had another name now.

Will Brown.

He carried winter inside him.

He carried George Red and Connor McLane. He carried the dogs, the storm, the tree, the knot Edmond had tied, and the laughter of Silas Vane when he said there was no court there.

He did not return simply to kill.

That was only the part Mary Creek had seen.

He returned because the dead had no tongue except his.

The vision snapped away.

Father Nicholas fell to one knee in the snow.

The ruined camp was ruined again. The cabin roof lay collapsed. The traps hung rusted in the trees. The fire burned low. The coffin stood lashed to the sled. Will Brown's dead figure remained near the rope-marked tree, head bent sideways, eyes fixed upon Edmond Smith.

Edmond was weeping now.

Not loudly. Not as a repentant man might weep before an altar. It came out of him in dry, ugly sounds, as though the tears had been frozen too long and hurt him as they passed.

"It wasn't like I told," he said.

Father Nicholas rose slowly.

"No."

Edmond shook his head.

"It wasn't. There was no fight with Caleb. Not first. Not the way I said."

He covered his mouth with one hand. The hand shook.

"Say it," Father Nicholas said.

Edmond looked at him with hatred.

Then he looked at the dead man by the tree.

And the hatred failed.

"George found it," Edmond said. "The food. Silas had been cutting from the sack. Saving for himself. For us, he said after. For the men who could make it out. That was how he spoke. Always making murder sound like arithmetic."

He swallowed hard.

"George said he would tell. Said when we got back, Silas would be finished. Silas laughed at that. Said no one was getting back if five men kept eating what three dogs could pull."

"And you?"

"I listened."

"No," Father Nicholas said.

Edmond flinched.

"You did more."

The trapper's face twisted.

"I held Connor."

The words came out almost too softly to hear.

"I held him when he tried to stop it. George went down first. Silas cut him. Connor went for Silas, and I held him. I held him because Silas shouted at me to do it, and because I was hungry, and because I was afraid, and because some part of me had already counted the food."

He pressed his palms to his eyes.

"God help me."

Father Nicholas said nothing.

"Connor got loose. Ran outside. I caught him. Silas came after. I knew what he meant to do. I knew. I still held him."

The dead man by the tree did not move.

"Caleb saw everything," Edmond said. "He had gone for wood. Came back when George screamed. Saw Connor. Saw me. Saw Silas with the knife. He called us murderers. Said he would see us hang. Said he would drag us south if he had to crawl."

"And so you tied him."

Edmond nodded once.

"Silas said we could not kill three. Said two was bad luck enough. Said Caleb might freeze by morning and then his death would belong to the weather."

"But you knew."

"Yes."

"You knew he was alive when you left."

"Yes."

"Say it."

Edmond looked at the priest with a face emptied of defiance.

"We left him alive."

The words went into the camp and stayed there.

The fire gave a sharp crack.

Snow slid from the broken cabin roof.

The dogs were silent.

"Silas said no one would know," Edmond whispered. "Said there was no law beyond the ridge. Said men vanish in winter every year. George and Connor would be marked lost. Caleb too. We would say storm. We would say wolves. We would say anything."

"And Mary Creek believed you."

"They wanted to. Men always want the simple story."

"Two came home," Father Nicholas said.

"Two came home."

"Until Caleb Rusk returned."

Edmond's mouth trembled.

"I knew him the moment I saw him in Harland's. Not his face. That had changed. He looked like something dug out of old ice. But his hands. The wrists." Edmond rubbed his own wrists as though rope burned there too. "Silas knew him first. Said the name. Fool. He should have kept his mouth shut."

"Brown killed him."

"Caleb killed him."

"Yes."

The priest looked toward the figure by the tree.

"Then he meant to kill you."

Edmond nodded.

"He was looking for me."

"Why did he not?"

"I wasn't there that night. I came in late. By then Silas was dead and Caleb was tied in Walters's cell. I thought..." He laughed once, horribly. "I thought the town had saved me."

"Instead it hanged him."

"Yes."

"Before he could speak."

Edmond looked up, and there was terror in him again.

"No. Before he could finish."

A wind moved through the basin.

It had not been there before. It slipped among the trees without shaking them. It passed over the fire and lowered it. It touched the hanging traps, and one by one they began to move.

Not swing.

Move.

The old chains tightened. The rusted jaws clicked softly. From beneath the snow came the faintest sound, like many men drawing breath after long silence.

Father Nicholas crossed himself.

Edmond closed his eyes.

"They brought us here," he said.

The priest looked at him.

"Who?"

But he knew.

Edmond opened his eyes and stared at the coffin.

"George. Connor. Caleb. Maybe the dogs too. Maybe all of them. Brown asked you because he knew you would come. He knew Walters would be too weak to refuse you. He knew Mary Creek would want him gone. And he knew I was the only man who could find this place."

The dead figure near the tree seemed farther away now.

Or perhaps the snow had thickened between them.

"Silas died first," Edmond said. "Because Caleb found him."

"And you were next."

"Yes."

"But the town hanged Caleb."

Edmond looked at the rope-scarred tree.

"So the dead arranged the rest."

No one spoke after that.

The confession lay among them heavier than the coffin. It lay over the old camp, over the bones of George Red and Connor McLane, over the place where Caleb Rusk had been tied, over Edmond Smith, who had lived years past the hour in which his soul had first begun to rot.

Will Brown stood a little while longer beneath the spruce.

Then the falling snow passed through him.

His shape thinned.

For one moment his face changed. The broken neck remained, the dead eyes remained, but behind them Father Nicholas saw the man from the vision: Caleb Rusk, starving, bound, betrayed, still alive beneath the wolves and the storm.

His lips moved.

No sound came.

Then he was gone.

The fire rose again slightly, as though released.

Edmond collapsed to his knees in the snow.

Father Nicholas did not go to him at first. He went instead to the rope-marked tree. He placed one gloved hand against the scars in the bark. Beneath the glove, through leather and wool and wood and years, he imagined he could feel the pressure of the rope.

"Caleb Rusk," he said quietly.

The name sounded different there.

Not like an accusation.

Like a body found.

Behind him, Edmond Smith bowed over the snow and whispered the same words again and again, though whether to God, the priest, or the dead, Father Nicholas could not tell.

"We left him alive. We left him alive. We left him alive."

Above them, Black Mercy Ridge stood unseen in the dark.

Around them, the old camp listened.

Chapter 9: The Burial

At dawn the old camp looked smaller.

The night had taken much from it. The fire had burned low. The snow had covered the bones again, and the broken cabin sagged under a fresh white weight. Even Black Mercy Ridge had withdrawn behind gray cloud and falling frost. Yet nothing felt finished.

Father Nicholas knew that before he stood.

The confession had been spoken, but not answered. Caleb Rusk lay in his coffin. George Red and Connor McLane lay scattered beneath the snow. The camp still held them all.

Edmond sat near the dead fire with his head bowed and his hands hanging between his knees. He looked emptied. The violence had gone from him for the moment, leaving only a worn and frightened man in its place.

"We burn it," he said.

Father Nicholas was wrapping his Bible in cloth. He stopped.

"No."

Edmond lifted his face.

"We burn the coffin, the cabin, the whole cursed place. Then we go."

"No."

"You heard what I said last night."

"I heard."

"Then you know what is here."

"Yes," Father Nicholas said. "That is why it must be buried."

Edmond laughed once, without strength.

"You think a hole in frozen ground settles this?"

"I think it is my duty."

"Your duty will get you killed."

"Then it will be the last duty I perform."

Edmond stood unsteadily. He looked toward the coffin and then toward the rope-marked tree. His face tightened with fear and anger.

"I will not dig for him."

"I did not ask you to."

"I will not put him in the earth."

"Then I will do it myself."

For a moment Edmond seemed ready to strike him. Instead he seized his rifle from the snow, turned from the fire, and walked away between the trees.

The dogs watched him go.

Saul gave a low growl. Nettle stood but did not follow. Pike barked once, sharp and afraid, then fell silent.

Father Nicholas waited until Edmond disappeared among the spruce. Then he took the shovel from the sled.

The ground was hard.

He chose a place near the rope-marked tree, not too close to the roots, and began to dig. At first the shovel could do little more than scrape snow away. Beneath it lay crusted earth and ice. He used the axe to break the top layer, then the shovel to clear it. The work was slow, brutal, and clumsy. The cold entered his fingers. His back began to ache. His breath came hard and froze in his beard.

Still he dug.

After some time the shovel struck something that was not stone.

The sound was hollow and dry.

Father Nicholas knelt and cleared the earth with his gloved hands.

A bone lay beneath the crust.

Then another.

He stopped digging.

For a while he remained very still, his hand resting near the exposed remains. They had not been buried properly. Snow, animals, and years had done what men had refused to do. He cleared more earth and found a strip of rotted cloth, a button, the dark curve of a rib.

He understood then.

Caleb Rusk had not asked to come here only for himself.

The dead man in the coffin had come back for the men left behind with him. George Red. Connor McLane. Perhaps the dogs too. Perhaps every soul that had gone into that winter camp and never been carried out.

This was not merely a grave.

It was the true burial ground.

Father Nicholas bowed his head.

"I understand," he whispered.

Behind him, one of the dogs barked.

He turned.

Edmond Smith stood at the edge of the camp.

He had returned without sound. Snow lay on his shoulders. His rifle hung loose in one hand. He looked at the open ground, the exposed bone, the shovel, and the coffin. The dogs barked at him now, all three of them, not wildly but with warning. Saul strained against his tether, teeth bare.

Edmond did not look at the dogs.

"What did you find?" he asked.

"You know."

The trapper's face worked.

Father Nicholas rose slowly.

"Come here."

“No.”

“Come here.”

Edmond took one step, then stopped.

“I said I would not dig.”

“You will not dig,” Father Nicholas said. “You will speak.”

Edmond’s eyes narrowed.

“What?”

“Their names.”

The trapper went pale.

“No.”

“You will say them.”

“No.”

“You left them without burial. You left them without witness. You left them without names.”

Edmond shook his head.

Father Nicholas stepped toward him.

“I cannot judge you. That belongs to God. I cannot punish you. That belongs to God also. But while I stand here, you will not deny the dead their names.”

The wind moved through the basin.

The dogs stopped barking.

Even Edmond seemed to hear the silence that followed.

Father Nicholas pointed to the broken ground.

“Say them.”

Edmond’s mouth opened, but nothing came.

“Say them.”

The trapper lowered his head.

“George Red.”

The name passed into the cold air.

Father Nicholas waited.

“Connor McLane.”

The priest looked toward the coffin.

“And?”

Edmond’s hands clenched.

“Caleb Rusk.”

The snow seemed to fall more softly then.

Father Nicholas crossed himself.

“Again.”

Edmond looked up, startled.

“All of them,” the priest said. “As men. Not as ghosts. Not as hunger. Not as trouble that found you late.”

Edmond swallowed.

“George Red. Connor McLane. Caleb Rusk.”

His voice broke on the last name.

Father Nicholas nodded.

Together, though Edmond did not seem to know when he began helping, they worked at the grave. They widened the hole as best they could, gathering the bones Father Nicholas uncovered and placing them carefully in the earth. Edmond would not touch them at first. Then he did. His hands shook, but he did not draw back.

They brought the coffin from the sled.

It was heavy, heavier than it should have been. The dogs watched in silence while the two men dragged it through the snow. Twice Edmond cursed under his breath. Once Father Nicholas nearly fell. At last they lowered it into the grave beside the gathered remains.

No one spoke for a while.

Then Father Nicholas opened his Bible.

His voice was rough from cold and exhaustion, but it did not fail. He read the words for the dead. He prayed for Caleb Rusk, known in Mary Creek as Will Brown. He prayed for George Red and Connor McLane, murdered and abandoned. He prayed for Silas Vane, who had died with fear on his face. He prayed for Edmond Smith, though Edmond turned away when he heard his name. He prayed for all men lost in winter, for the guilty and the betrayed, for those who died unshriven and those who lived too long without confession.

When the prayer was finished, they covered the grave.

The work took the rest of the morning.

By the end, Father Nicholas could barely stand. Edmond leaned on the shovel, gray-faced and silent. The mound was rough, too shallow by town standards, but deep enough for the frozen country and honest enough for God.

Father Nicholas made a cross from two broken pieces of sled wood and bound them with a strip of old harness. He drove it into the head of the grave.

There were no dates.

Only names, scratched clumsily with Edmond’s knife:

GEORGE RED
CONNOR McLANE
CALEB RUSK

Father Nicholas stood before the grave and felt, for the first time since leaving Mary Creek, that his duty had been done.

Not justice. He did not mistake it for that.

Justice was larger than a priest with cold hands and a broken shovel. Justice belonged to God, and so did punishment. If Edmond Smith was to answer, he would answer in the time and manner appointed.

Father Nicholas had buried the dead.
He had spoken their names.
That was all he had been given to do.
And for the moment, in that silent basin beneath Black Mercy Ridge, it was
enough.

Chapter 10: The Road Back

That evening, after the burial, Edmond Smith walked into the woods.

Father Nicholas saw him go.

The light was already failing. In that northern country, evening did not come down slowly. It gathered in the trees first, then moved across the snow, then rose out of the hollows until a man found himself standing in darkness before he had finished one thought.

The priest was kneeling beside the small fire, trying to make coffee with hands that could barely feel the tin cup. The dogs lay close together, worn out and watchful. The new grave stood near the rope-marked tree, with its rough cross of sled wood planted at the head.

Edmond had been sitting apart from the fire for a long time.

He had not spoken since the last shovelful of earth was laid over the coffin. Once or twice Father Nicholas had looked at him and found him staring at the grave, not with anger now, nor even fear, but with the dull emptiness of a man who had reached the place he had spent years fleeing.

Then Edmond stood.

He took his rifle. He did not take food. He did not take his blanket. He did not look at the priest.

He walked past the fire and toward the black trees below the ridge.

“Edmond,” Father Nicholas called.

The trapper did not turn.

“Edmond.”

Still no answer.

The dogs raised their heads. Saul gave a low growl, then fell silent.

Father Nicholas stood, but he did not follow.

Dark was already in the timber. The country beyond the firelight was strange, broken, and deep with snow. A man could die within fifty paces of camp and never be found until spring, if spring chose to show him. Father Nicholas was exhausted beyond pride. His legs shook under him. His back ached from digging. His hands had been split by cold and work. He knew that if he went after Edmond in the dark, there would likely be two men lost instead of one.

So he remained by the fire.

“Edmond,” he called once more.

The trees took the name and gave nothing back.

After a while he could no longer hear the trapper’s steps.

The night that followed was bitter.

A wind came down from the ridge after full dark and moved through the basin with a dry, steady force. It drove snow across the grave and over the ashes of the old camp. It shook the rusted traps in the trees until their chains made faint sounds like teeth chattering. The dogs pressed close to the fire, and Father Nicholas fed it with the last of the wood he had strength to gather.

He did not sleep much.

At times he thought he heard Edmond walking beyond the trees.

At times he thought he heard another step beside his.

Once, deep in the night, the dogs rose together and stared toward the ridge. Their bodies were rigid, their ears forward. Father Nicholas lifted his head from his blanket and listened.

There was nothing.

No call. No shot. No cry of a man fallen on stone.

Only the wind passing over the new grave.

Near dawn, the storm weakened.

The sky grew from black to gray. The basin appeared piece by piece: the collapsed cabin, the broken sled, the hanging traps, the rope-marked tree, the grave. Snow had smoothed the mound during the night, but the cross still stood.

Father Nicholas rose stiffly.

Edmond had not returned.

The priest waited until the light strengthened. He drank the last bitter mouthful of coffee, divided what little food remained among himself and the dogs, and then went to look for tracks.

He found them beyond the fire.

Edmond's footprints led between the trees, climbing toward the ridge. The wind had half-filled them, but not enough to hide their direction. They went steadily upward, not wandering as the tracks of a lost man might. He had known where he was going.

Father Nicholas followed.

It was hard work. The snow deepened under the trees and crusted over in open places. Twice he fell. Once he had to stop and lean against a spruce until the blackness cleared from his sight. He carried Edmond's axe, not the rifle. The rifle was gone with Edmond.

The footprints climbed through timber, then across a bare stretch of rock where snow lay thin and hard. Beyond that the ridge rose more sharply. The land seemed broken there, split by old frost and weather. Black stone showed under white powder. The wind had a different sound along the ridge, thinner and colder, as if it had traveled a long way without touching any living thing.

The tracks led to the edge of a drop.

Father Nicholas stopped.

The ground fell away suddenly before him. It was not a cliff in the grand sense, not a mountain wall or some noble precipice. It was worse because it was plain and near: a steep break in the ridge where stone and frozen earth dropped into a narrow ravine filled with shadow. Snow had collected along the lip in a smooth overhang.

Edmond's tracks went to that edge.

They did not turn back.

Father Nicholas stood there a long while.

He looked down into the ravine, but he could not see the bottom clearly. Snow blew through it in thin veils. There were rocks below, black shapes under white. A fallen spruce lay across part of the drop. Nothing moved.

He called once.

"Edmond."

The name fell into the ravine and was lost.

He called again, but more softly.

No answer came.

He did not climb down.

He knew his strength. He knew the cold. He knew the dogs waited below, and Mary Creek lay far behind him, and one dead man more could not be carried out of that place. He stood at the edge with his head bowed and said a prayer.

Not a long one.

Only enough.

Then he turned back.

By the time he reached the camp again, the dogs were restless and hungry. They greeted him not with affection but with need. Father Nicholas gathered what remained: the Bible, the blanket, the little food, the tin cup, the axe, and the shovel. He left the broken things behind. He stood once more before the grave.

The names were partly covered with frost.

George Red.

Connor McLane.

Caleb Rusk.

He cleared them with his glove.

Then he crossed himself.

"I have done what I could," he said.

The wind moved across the basin.

No voice answered.

He harnessed the remaining dogs with difficulty. Edmond had done that work before, and the priest's hands were slow and clumsy. Saul resisted him. Pike trembled. Nettle stood patiently, as if she understood more than the others. At last the traces were set well enough.

The sled was lighter without the coffin.

That was the mercy that saved him.

The road back was worse than the road north.

Father Nicholas had Edmond's old trail to follow, but snow had damaged it, and in places the wind had erased it altogether. He walked when the dogs needed help, rode only when his legs failed, and more than once woke to find the sled stopped and the dogs staring back at him as though waiting for command from a better man.

He spoke to them by name.

"Nettle. Pike. Saul."

Sometimes they obeyed.

Sometimes they obeyed the trail itself.

The food ran low before the second day. By then Father Nicholas was cutting pieces too small to satisfy hunger and too precious to waste. He gave more to the dogs than to himself. Without them, he would die. Perhaps with them he would die also, but duty had carried him north and the dogs must carry him south.

The cold deepened.

His beard froze solid around his mouth. His feet lost feeling and then regained it in pain. His hands bled through cracked skin. At night he made poor fires and slept beside them in broken pieces, waking each time the flame sank.

Once he thought he saw Edmond walking far off through the trees.

Once he thought he saw Will Brown standing on the creek ice, watching him pass.

Once, near the old place where Jar had died beside the coffin, all three dogs stopped and would not move until Father Nicholas prayed aloud.

He never knew whether those things happened.

On the fourth day after leaving Black Mercy Ridge, Mary Creek appeared through falling snow.

At first he thought it was another vision. A stain of smoke above the trees. A dark line of cabins. The trading house. The blacksmith's shed. The tiny chapel with its worn blue door.

Then a dog barked.

A man shouted.

The settlement came alive.

They found Father Nicholas half-frozen behind the sled, walking because he had forgotten how to stop. Harland was the first to reach him. Anders Lofgren came next and took the dogs. John Walters came running from the town office without his hat, with Abigail behind him on the porch, her face white and hard.

"Where is Edmond?" Walters asked.

Father Nicholas looked at him.

For a moment he saw again the ridge, the footprints, the drop, the empty ravine.

Then he said, "Dead."

Walters's mouth opened.

"How?"

The priest's voice was rough, almost gone.

"Storm."

That was all.

No one pressed him then. He was too cold, too hungry, too near collapse. They brought him into the chapel because that was where he wished to go. Someone built up the stove. Someone took off his boots. Someone wrapped his hands. Abigail Walters herself brought broth and stood over him until he swallowed it.

Later, men asked more questions.

Father Nicholas answered few of them.

He said the coffin had been buried. He said Edmond had died in the storm. He said the country near Black Mercy Ridge was no place for men to travel. When asked whether Will Brown had been buried as he requested, he said yes.

When asked whether anything else had happened, he closed his eyes.

"The dead were named," he said.

And because he was a priest, and because he had returned half-dead from a place other men feared, Mary Creek accepted that answer, though it did not satisfy them.

Winter came fully the following week.

The creek froze hard. Snow buried the cemetery rise. The trails closed. Silas Vane's sons came in at last and found their father already in the town ground and his killer gone north beneath priestly words and frozen earth. They raged for two days, drank for three, and then silence took them as it took everyone in time.

John Walters wrote in the town record that Will Brown, murderer of Silas Vane, had been hanged by lawful sentence and buried beyond the settlement at his own request.

Below that, in smaller writing, Father Nicholas added another line when no one was watching.

Also buried: George Red, Connor McLane, Caleb Rusk.

He did not add Edmond Smith.

For Edmond there was no body, no grave, and no certainty that belonged to men.

Only a line of tracks leading to the edge of Black Mercy Ridge, and after that, God's own country.

Father Nicholas remained in Mary Creek.

He kept the chapel. He said prayers over the dead. He heard confessions from men who came in from the cold with lies on their lips and fear in their eyes. He did his duty, as before.

But each year, when November darkened and the creek took its first skin of ice, he would sometimes wake before dawn and listen.

At such times he thought he heard, far to the north, three dogs pulling an empty sled over frozen snow.

And once, only once, he thought he heard three quiet knocks from the direction of the mayor's old cell.

Then silence.

Nothing more.