

PROLOGUE

The climb had been steep. Hell of a place, he thought, but time was running out. He'd left his horse at the bottom of the draw. Couldn't chance the stupid animal blowing or snorting, worst of all, whinnying. He hadn't thought it would take so long when he's agreed to their proposal. Finding the right spot. That had been a bitch. He'd been ordered to make the disappearance complete. He'd watched his quarry for days. No pattern to the man's actions. Only by chance he'd been drinking coffee in a corner booth of the café. Overheard the rancher talking to a friend. Caught the words 'line fence' and he'd listened. He knew the area. Perfect. Remote. Wild. Private. There was a way out. Trouble was, he'd forgotten how hellish steep it was.

He'd fought to control his labored breathing. He'd started early, before daylight. Had to be in position before his quarry arrived. He'd hunted all his life. Killed a lot of game. Easier to think of his victim as just another animal. Had no qualms about killing a human. God knows, he'd done it before, but somehow this wasn't the same. Those slant-eyed gooks. Who needed them anyhow? A vision of swamps and rice paddies flashed before his eyes as the sound of crashing brush struck his ears like a grenade. 'Nam revisited? Sweat charged from his trembling body as he leaned against the rough bark of a yellow pine to quiet his pounding heart. Clenched fists pressed like concrete against his teeth as he strove to fight the panic that rose in his throat. Remember the money, screamed the back of his mind. *All that God-dammed money!*

The noise was closer. To his left? He couldn't be sure. He reached for his rifle, then froze. Would there be enough time? He rubbed his hands down the leg of his jeans to dry a fresh burst of sweat. His quarry broke from the timber and stopped. Horse and rider became one. A single statue without motion. What the hell was he staring at? Something up on the mountain. Couldn't shoot yet. Wrong angle. Why the hell didn't he move? The stalker relaxed slightly; moistened his lips as he stared in envy at the beautiful mare beneath the riders long legs. Now *that* was a horse. He'd never seen a better one. He'd seen her rope, team-tie, cut steers. She could do it all. He might not have much of an education, but he knew good

horseflesh. Would there be a way he could have her? He shook his head. *She* had to disappear, too. He wouldn't kill her; he couldn't. A man was one thing, but a good horse; maybe he could ship her down south to a remote area. Pick her up later. This was a pipe dream, he knew; but man was she beautiful.

His reverie snapped when his quarry began the long climb up the mountain. He raised his rifle, looked through the scope; well not his exactly. One they had left for him to find. It had been hidden behind a pile of brush along a mountain road, miles from this valley. A Mauser 8mm with a sixl-power Swarovski scope. Must have cost someone a cool couple'a beans. He'd tried a few practice rounds. What a beauty! Accurate! Especially along side his cruddy old 30-06. Trouble was, it, too, had to disappear.

The rider moved slowly, studying the fence. The killer moved carefully, cautiously, to a tree on the very edge of the meadow. Dangerous, but he had no choice. He leaned into the trunk of another large, sticky, yellow pine. Legs and hips helping to brace his shoulder, he tightened his grip on the stock and eased his finger into the trigger guard.

Horse and rider formed a perfect silhouette against the sky. Almost he thought, like the bastard had been cut out and pasted there. As the rider dropped his reins to the neck of his horse, a shell left the barrel of the powerful rifle.

The sniper lowered his weapon, momentarily closed his eyes. It was over. What had he done? His victim was rich. And to the shooter, arrogant. Or so he had always seemed. Other than that he guessed he had nothing against the powerful rancher. As he dropped his rifle, he felt the bile rise. He leaned to his left and retched. He spit and coughed, then took a deep breath and leaned back against the tree. Only the money, the God-dammed money. \$50,000 they'd said. He's never even *seen* that much money, let alone held it in his hands. He wiped his chin and stared up across the bowl. The mare grazed. The man on the ground was still. Time to go.