

Chapter Two

November 10, 1989

Marcus pumped his foot on the gas a few times and turned the engine over again. This time the old pickup started. It always did, eventually. He pushed the gearshift into reverse and backed out of the parking lot. The headlights were shining on the sign mounted high on two posts at the edge of the small, paved lot. Marcus wiped the inside of the windshield with the sleeve of his jacket—his breath was fogging up the glass in the harsh chill of the November night. He stared at the sign for several minutes as it taunted the pain of that night's fresh wound—Eaden's defeat in the final game of his final football season.

Welcome to Eaden High School

Home of the Cougars

1970 Montana Class C Boys Basketball Champions

1973 Montana Six-Man State Football Champions

Marcus thought back on all of the work he and his teammates had put in during this football season and shook his head. They had each sacrificed so much time and invested so much pain to earn the chance to bring home the trophy, and then they blew it. He looked away from the sign and stared at the practice field on the far side of the parking lot. The field was now ghostly silent and covered in a thin layer of frost.

He had dreaded his time on that practice field during every school day for the last three and a half months, and he felt a strange mixture of relief and sadness that his time there was done.

The disappointment was beginning to wear him down, so he forced his mind to find better thoughts.

A crooked smile came to his face as he remembered the hit that he had put on Mr. Thorton the day that an injury had left their team shorthanded. The teacher had agreed to suit up to give them enough warm bodies to run full-squad six-on-six plays near the end of practice.

The weak-armed freshman quarterback on the scout team lofted a pass across the middle to Mr. Thorton, and Marcus had ample time to make up the distance from his safety spot to the ball's flight path. Mr. Thorton jumped and stretched to pluck the ball out of the air just as Marcus met him at full speed. Marcus's shoulder, powered by his six-foot, 165-pound frame, combined with his full head of steam, collided squarely with Mr. Thorton's ribs and sent the teacher flying in the opposite direction. Marcus could hear the air being knocked out of Mr. Thorton's lungs and heard him trying to swear after he hit the ground.

After a few minutes of gasping for breath, Mr. Thorton managed to get up, take off his helmet, and mutter "nice hit" as he swatted Marcus's helmet. He then turned and walked off the field without another word. Marcus felt a little bad about putting the hurt on his favorite teacher, but it was the best hit he had ever laid on anybody in his life.

Marcus was pulled from his nostalgia when the yellow team school bus backed out of the parking lot and drove past him. The other twelve players and the coach had already unloaded and driven away, and now the bus driver was heading home as well.

The four-hour road trip back from Warwick had been particularly painful. They had expected to win that six-man semifinal play-off game, even though all of the supposed football experts at the *Great Falls Tribune* had picked against them.

"Although Eaden has their best squad in over a decade, their swift lineup doesn't appear to have the size to overcome Warwick's power. This game shapes up to be one of the most interesting of the entire 1989 football season in any class, and we see Warwick wearing Eaden down late and winning 55 to 40." That quote from the sports editor was taped to each of their lockers the morning the article was published, and they had all smiled and laughed knowingly when they read it.

"We're going to make that writer look like a fool," they told each other with a certainty that comes with confidence.

They hadn't planned for the possibility of losing. If they had, they would be drinking by now. But drinking took an advance coordination of buyers and either an empty, warm building or the scavenging of wood for a bonfire. The other players all scattered toward their homes instead. The party would happen tomorrow night; the plans had already been made on the bus.

It was very late and Marcus was exhausted. He didn't know why, but he just wasn't ready to go home.

He put the pickup into second gear and drove past the weathered houses and abandoned buildings lining the length of Main Street. The end of the street was the downtown block that consisted of the Eaden Mercantile, a barber shop, The Café, a service station, and the bars.

There were two bars in Eaden. Despite the town being the home of only two hundred people, neither bar had ever been forced out of business. Like nearly all Montana farm towns, Eaden had been slowly losing population ever since the peak of the homestead days in the early 1900s. Main Street and the gravel side streets surrounding downtown were littered with abandoned and neglected buildings that whispered stories of a more prosperous past. But like a bloodied boxer with a granite chin, the two bars survived.

One bar was named The Bar. Two doors down, with only The Café separating them, was The Other Bar, which was the more popular of the two, largely because the owner had invested in satellite TV. The residents of the barstools enjoyed switching between Country Music Television, college football, Spanish bullfighting, unscrambled pornography, and anything else the big dish in the back lot could capture as they lived their lives, one drink at a time.

The street in front of the two bars was crowded with pickups, Suburbans, and a few older large cars parked at random angles. Almost all the people in the bars had been at the game, and they had all arrived back in Eaden about an hour before the team bus. Marcus knew that those bars were now packed with self-declared football experts, each with strong opinions about who was to blame for this loss. He assumed that his name was coming up a lot. He had coughed up a fumble and thrown two interceptions. This wasn't the way his final game was supposed to end. It wasn't the way it had played out in his many years of playground fantasies.

As Marcus drove past the bars, he saw the fleeting images of people through the neon Bud and Rainier signs hanging in the windows. His mind filled in the rest, and he could see the old men drinking cheap beer and hear them talking about their own high school years. All were football stars in their day, and by the end of the night, each of

them would be boasting of football scholarship offers from Montana State University and the University of Montana that each had graciously turned down so they could stay on the farm to help out their folks. Such is often the way of conversations involving the passage of time, the consumption of alcohol, and the polite acceptance of small lies.

There were the mothers talking among themselves, sipping on bottles of Bud Light and telling each other how well their sons had played. His mother, Rita, was there. She had ridden to the game with their neighbors, and he saw their Suburban parked near the front door of The Bar.

There were the fathers, drinking Velvet Cokes, talking about how their boys should have won that game, and how the coach had messed up by letting that Matosich kid from Warwick burn them time and time again.

All of the fathers were there, with one exception. Marcus's father was back at home, probably in his workshop, just as he had been during the game.

Marcus drove out of town, where the pavement of Main Street ended and the road turned to gravel. He headed toward The Knob, a treeless hill near town that ruled over the sea of smaller rolling hills surrounding Eaden. Marcus turned and ascended the mile-long dirt road to the matching pair of rutted, tire-etched trails that scaled the back side of the bald hill. He reached the top and killed the engine, leaving the pickup in first gear as a parking brake.

In the moonlight he saw the shimmer of broken beer bottles, partially burned boards from bonfires, and other relics of past parties.

There were no police based in Eaden, and if a deputy sheriff traveled the fifty miles from Lewistown to check in on the locals, everybody knew about it within minutes. News travels fast in a small town.

When no deputies were in town, kids would light bonfires on The Knob and drink the beer and wine coolers that someone had bought for them. With the bonfire beacon shining, bright and visible for miles, others would join them and the party would grow as it took on a life all its own.

But there had been no bonfires up here since the summer. As soon as football and girls' basketball started, almost every kid in the school was on strict training rules that prohibited drinking. In the past, kids had flouted these rules, as Marcus had learned from

legends passed down from older generations of Eaden graduates. He heard stories of sports stars flaunting their drinking during the season, and some had even shown up drunk at a coach's house. In many of these stories, the coach kicked the players off the team, and in others the coach turned a blind eye. But that sort of thing never happened anymore. Nobody broke the training rules these days. But when the season ended, the floodgates opened. Tomorrow night was going to be the party night.

The Knob was barren in the moonlight; Marcus and his pickup were its only visitors. He looked out over the miles and miles of blackened landscape dotted with the lights from the farms scattered widely over the expanse. He and Eric Taylor and Jeff Williams had spent hours up here on many summer nights, sometimes drinking beer and sometimes drinking Pepsi, trying to figure out which lights belonged to which farm. They eventually matched up every single light with the name of each farm, and in doing so laid claim to the bragging rights for knowledge known to nobody else on Earth.

The interior light in Marcus's pickup hadn't worked for years, so Marcus patted his seat in the darkness, searching for the new Shotgun Messiah CD he had received in the mail from Columbia House the week before. He couldn't find the CD on the bench seat, so he frantically lurched forward and swept the floorboards with his hand. The side of his hand banged against the missing CD case, and his anxiety faded as he picked it up and wiped off the dirt.

His entire CD library, rising from the obsolescence of his cassette collection, was made up of the introductory special offer from Columbia House: seven CDs for a penny (plus a sizable shipping and handling fee, of course), with only three more to buy over the next two years. The nearest music store was more than a hundred miles away in Great Falls, and as his free days came to an end on the first day of football practice, many months passed between opportunities to buy new music in a real store. Even then, CDs were too expensive for a buying binge. This left Columbia House mail order as his only option during most of the year. When Marcus pulled the large rectangular cardboard box out of the mailbox, goose bumps rose all over his arms and neck. He ripped it open, touching the CDs he had ordered many weeks earlier.

The first time Marcus opened up his new sound system in the school parking lot, Eric said, “Why would you put a stereo in that piece of shit? It’s worth more than the damn pickup!”

Of course, Eric’s dad bought him a brand new Chevy pickup for his sixteenth birthday. Marcus would have killed for a new pickup, but that much money just wasn’t going to be there no matter what he did. The next-best thing for him was his 1974 Ford pickup that barely ran, complemented by a \$400 CD player, amp, equalizer, and speaker package from the J.C. Whitney catalog. He installed it himself by trial and error, and blew out eleven fuses in the process.

Eventually, he was able to match the correct wires from behind the metal dashboard to all of the wires of his discount mail-order stereo system, and in one glorious Frankenstein moment, it came to life in his hands. His first glimpse of the soft-orange digital display, combined with the crisp guitar riffs of his Motley Crue CD screaming from the four speakers, brought a rare howl of excitement from Marcus’s lips. He had spent a big chunk of his summer earnings on that sound system, and in that one moment, it was worth every penny.

Marcus slid the Shotgun Messiah CD into the deck as he soaked in the silence of the cold night. He turned on the CD player and basked in the noise. He imagined that the music was magnificent thunder surrounding him as he wrapped himself in a blanket of darkness. Music always sounded better in this private, serene place where his thoughts were crisper, deeper, and happier. This was where he dreamed about great things.

He fantasized about winning state in basketball. Marcus would be the player who would step up his game, shoulder the burden, and achieve the impossible. He would be the heroic young warrior for his town, and his legend would live eternally in the stories told in the two bars.

He imagined himself as the lead singer of a world-famous rock band, and he sketched out in his mind plans to bring his band back to Eaden for a free show for everyone within a hundred miles of the venue—an open pasture outside of town—and how they would all idolize him and cheer his name.

Marcus would then set aside his truly fantastic dreams and think about how his life might be a year from now in college, and where he might live and what he might do years into the future.

He would always conclude with the same thought—he would dream about a day when his father might come back from wherever it was he had gone deep inside his confused mind.

It had been years since the last time his father, Walter Andrews, had drifted more than a couple hundred yards from the house where he was raised and where their family now lived. It had been built by Marcus's grandfather, who died in a tractor accident when Walter was still a baby. Marcus's grandmother kept the farm and ran it with the help of hired hands for years until his dad was old enough to take over.

Marcus never really knew his grandmother. She died when he was only three years old.

“How did you meet Dad, Mom?” Marcus was nine years old when he asked that question during a game of cribbage. Marcus was losing, and he wanted to move the subject away from his dad's teasing.

“How did we meet?” his mom said. “Hmmm. It was at the movies.”

“The movies?” Marcus said. “At the inside theater or the drive-in?” His mom was from Denton, which was about seventy miles from Eaden. Lewistown was the largest town in the area, and it had always been the meeting place for all of the small town kids. It had theaters. It had bowling alleys. It had pizza places. It had more than five thousand people. It was a big town.

“It was the drive-in,” his dad said, and Marcus's parents exchanged a long and knowing smile.

Marcus looked back and forth between them. “What? What?”

“Oh, nothing,” his mom said. “We met right before we both graduated. We'd seen each other at basketball tournaments and track meets and other school events. But we'd never talked to each other until he said hi to me at the concession stand that night.”

“It was between movies ... it was a double feature,” his dad said.

“What movies did you see?” Marcus asked. He had only seen a couple movies himself, but he had spent countless hours listening to records of Disney movies while following along in the illustrated books.

His parents looked to each other and shook their heads.

“I can’t remember,” his mom said. “I guess they must not have been that great.”

“Or maybe you just weren’t paying much attention,” his dad said with a smile.

Marcus laughed as his mom kicked his dad under the table.

Alone on The Knob with the music swirling around him, Marcus could still recall that conversation. Not knowing which movies they had seen had haunted him for years. He wanted to see those movies himself—he wanted to put himself into the night that led directly to his own life. He wondered if that could have provided some sort of symbolism or explanation that would finally allow the entire tale to make sense.

Rita and Walter had a lot of really good years together, and Marcus was a happy young kid. He played a lot, had lots of friends, had lots of toys, and didn’t have a care in the world outside of conflicts over having to eat foods that he thought were gross. His dad worked hard on their farm and was away from the house most of the day. But when he was able to get home before dark, he made sure that he and Marcus would spend some time playing whatever sport was on Marcus’s mind.

His dad poured a concrete pad near the house and put up a regulation basketball hoop. He coached Marcus on his jump shot from the time that he was strong enough to get the ball to the basket. They played one on one, and Marcus won about half of the time. He knew that his dad was letting him win, but he loved it just the same.

His dad built him a backstop with a tire suspended from a crossbeam in front of a freshly erected chain-link fence. When Marcus was aspiring to be a Little League pitcher, his dad would be his practice batter, crouching down low enough to simulate a typical Little Leaguer. The hanging tire was the impartial umpire. His dad sometimes made just

enough contact on one of Marcus's fastballs to give him some infield practice coming off of the mound, but Walter was sure to never take a swing that would show up the pitcher.

Years later, when his dad was no longer interested in playing ball with him, Marcus raised the tire a couple feet higher and used it to practice throwing the football for hours. He wondered if his dad could hear the rattle of the football on the chain-link fence from his workshop up on the hill. Marcus practiced his footwork on his three-step and five-step drops and then threw the ball as hard as he could through the tire and into the fence. He then always looked up, hoping to see shadows of movement against the lights of the workshop. As the sunlight faded on the horizon and darkness crept over the yard each night, he retreated into the warmth of the house. His father never did come to the window.

From about the time Marcus was six, many of his days were spent looking forward to the annual family vacation. His mom's best friend from high school lived in the Kalispell area of northwest Montana, and Marcus's family spent a week each year with her, her husband, and their kids at their house right on the shores of Flathead Lake. They had two kids: Jim was one year older and Tara, one year younger than Marcus. Several other families in the area would show up at least one day, and in total there were about ten kids to play with. This was an entire universe of new faces and experiences.

However, the ultimate adventure on the lake was still beyond his grasp. To be fair to all of the kids in all of the families, the parents decided that nobody would be allowed to water ski until they were ten years old. Marcus had watched with increasing jealousy and anxiety each year as he grew closer to his tenth birthday. It would be his leap toward adulthood as well as one of the most fun things he could ever imagine doing.

"Happy birthday!" his parents said in unison as he walked in the door. His mom was holding a cupcake with ten candles poking out of it. It looked like a flaming porcupine.

Marcus smiled, dropped his backpack on the floor by the front door, and kicked off his muddy shoes. "I thought we were waiting until my party this weekend for cake."

“Oh, your dad and I couldn’t wait ... You’ll get a big cake this weekend.” She held out the cupcake, and Marcus moved to the table. “Now hurry up and blow this out before the whole thing bursts into flames.”

Marcus blew out all of the candles with one large breath, and his parents cheered.

“What did you wish for?” Walter asked.

“You know he can’t tell us,” Rita said.

“Oh, that’s right,” Walter said. “I forgot about that rule.” Walter and Rita shared a quick smile and then he said, “Now I know you aren’t old enough to drive this year, and you certainly aren’t legal drinking age yet. Is there anything at all significant about the big double-digit birthday?”

Marcus broke into a wide smile and nodded his head. “Oh yeah,” he said. “I *finally* get to water ski this year.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Walter said as he laughed along with Rita. “You ready to practice again?”

“Yeah!” Marcus said and ran to the living room.

“Let me grab the camera,” Rita said.

This had become their ritual. Marcus rolled up one of the *Time* magazines lying on the coffee table, which he used to simulate the rope handle, and his dad showed him once again how to bend his knees and lean back against the force of the imaginary rope. Walter held him up from behind, his strong hands on Marcus’s sides, keeping Marcus from crashing backwards to the floor.

“Now shift your weight back a little bit more,” his dad said.

“Hey, you guys, look over here!” Rita said, and when they glanced up, she captured their smiles in the flash of her camera.

Two months later, the Xs on Marcus’s calendar finally ended their countdown to the day that he had been looking forward to—the day they were set to depart for Kalispell. Marcus got out of bed early without being called and made sure everything they were going to need was packed in their Suburban. He went back into the house to have some cereal and to rally his parents for an early departure. Instead, he found his mom sitting at the table, her face in her hands.

“What’s wrong?” Marcus asked. Rita looked up, startled.

“Oh, good morning ...” She bit her lower lip and then smiled weakly. “Sweetie, I know you were really looking forward to this trip. But your dad ... he’s not feeling well.”

“Oh. When will he be feeling better? Maybe tomorrow? We can just show up a little late, can’t we?”

Rita shook her head. “I don’t think so, Marcus. We just need to find something fun to do around here this week instead.” Her eyes were begging him to understand.

“What’s wrong with him?” His tone was one of anger rather than concern.

“He’s just not feeling well, Marcus.” They stared at each other with angry eyes, and then her face softened. “I’m really sorry. I know you were looking forward to this trip, but we just can’t go.”

“Let’s just go without him.”

“Don’t say that. We wouldn’t leave you home if you weren’t feeling well, would we?” She got up from the table and went into the kitchen. “Do you want some breakfast?” she asked, opening the refrigerator.

Marcus hadn’t heard her question. He had already gone back to his room. Out his bedroom window, Marcus saw his father walking to the workshop where he repaired his farm equipment and did some woodworking during the winter. Marcus didn’t see him again for the rest of the day.

Marcus scanned through the CD in his pickup’s sound system until he found his most recent favorite rock anthem, “Heartbreak Boulevard.” He turned up the stereo as loud as it would go without hissing distortion, and he closed his eyes. His body was exhausted, but the music brought out a last burst of energy. He danced with his upper body and sang as loud as he could. He couldn’t hear his own voice; in his mind, the singer’s voice was his own. If anyone had seen him at that moment, the embarrassment would have crushed him. But in his solitude, he experienced a shameless adrenaline rush. He could feel the music throughout his whole body, and the world was perfect.

When the song ended, reality crept back into his mind, and exhaustion once again reclaimed him. From the top of The Knob, he could see any vehicle traffic for at least five miles. Nobody was driving toward Eaden, and there was little activity on the streets of town except for the occasional car leaving the bars and driving into the country. He started the pickup and set off toward home.

He always drove slowly on the ten miles of gravel road to his house. People died on these roads. People died when they forgot that the gravel doesn't hold pickups to the ground like pavement, and once the rear end of a vehicle starts fishtailing, you have to be a good driver to pull yourself out of it before you end up in the ditch, or worse. Much of the road was built on the edge of steep canyons formed by tens of thousands of years of seasonal streams that ran heavy in the spring and turned to sour mud by midsummer.

The final song on the CD was nearly finished as he pulled up to the house and parked in the spot closest to the front door.

The windows of the house were all dark, but Marcus saw the familiar lights still shining in the window of his father's workshop. He killed the engine and sat for a moment in the silence. He grabbed his journal off the seat and looked at it for a lingering moment. He got out of the pickup, shut the door, and walked up the small hill.

Marcus suspected that his dad would be surprised to see him, and he paused just before he pushed the metal door open. His dad was finishing the final round of sanding on a small wooden box with a piece of fine grit sandpaper. He seemed startled when he heard Marcus walk in.

"Hey there," Walter said, putting the sandpaper down and turning to face the door.

"Hey, Dad." Marcus didn't come out here very often—it had been over a year, probably—and he took a long look around the large shop. Hundreds of wooden boxes with the same exact intricate carvings and hinged lids lined the walls. They were each about one foot cubed, and they were now piled up over six feet high all around the workshop. There were sculptures, too, made from wood and placed sporadically on top of the walls of small boxes. Most of them didn't really look like anything in particular, although Marcus picked one out that he thought was probably a snake, coiled and ready to strike.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” Marcus said.

“Yeah?” Walter said, looking at Marcus as if searching for any sign of sincerity. His father’s hopeful look gradually faded and his gaze returned once again to the box. “How did the game go?” he asked without looking back up.

“Shitty.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Marcus.” He held the box up to the overhead fluorescent light, turning it slightly to size up an imperfection. He picked up his sandpaper and attacked the spot with several strong strokes. He held the box back up to the light and a satisfied look came to his face.

Marcus looked at his father and tried to remember how he used to be. His hair was now almost always a few days overdue for a washing and what was left of it was always sticking out in all directions. A large, soft gut replaced what used to be an athletic profile. His skin hadn’t been tanned in years; virtually all his time was spent indoors these days.

Marcus stared at his father’s hands and he thought that they seemed out of proportion with his body. The strength of each of his father’s attacks on the wood with his tools or sandpaper made it appear that his hands were forged from a strange flexible metal instead of human flesh.

“How bad was it?”

“We lost by three, but Matosich scored all four of their touchdowns.”

His father said nothing, and Marcus continued to gaze around the shop, the silence gnawing at his nerves.

His father finally broke the silence and spoke as though time had stood still for the last several minutes. “His dad was a helluva football player back when I played.”

“Yeah ... well, Coach didn’t do us any favors with the defenses he was calling.” Marcus exhaled a long, silent yawn as he stretched his sore arms and legs.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” his father said as he picked up a small chisel from the workbench and began to trace the pattern of carvings on the box.

“Alrighty, I’m gonna go to bed,” Marcus said.

Walter didn’t look up, “Okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Dad.” Marcus stood at the door for a moment and watched his father hunch over the box. “Don’t stay up too late, okay?” He never knew how late his father stayed up at night, or how many hours or even days his father slept in the bedroom next to his mom’s room.

Walter didn’t look up from the box as he spoke. “Okay. Goodnight.”

Marcus left his bag with his football clothes and shoes in the pickup and went into the house. He pulled himself upstairs to his room and placed his journal in its usual place on his dresser. He fell into bed and expected to drift immediately into sleep. He rolled around in frustration, trying to make his battered body comfortable and trying to chase the ghosts of the previous summer from his mind. He growled and stared out his window, waiting for sleep to finally come.

