

CLAW  
HEART  
MOUNTAIN

DAVID  
OPPEGAARD

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FOR JOYCE JORGENSEN



I

WINDFALL





CLAW HEART MOUNTAIN SAT APART FROM EVERYTHING, LIKE A forgotten god hunkered in thought. It looked both eternal and lonely, without a friend in sight, surrounded by rolling hills dotted in sagebrush and cheatgrass, the summer sky a hazy blue above it. Nova watched the mountain through the SUV's windshield, hypnotized by its looming presence. She was driving, while Mackenna sat in the front passenger seat, playing a game on her phone. The three dudes—Landon, Isaac, and Wyatt—were sprawled in the SUV's two-tiered backseat. Landon and Wyatt were asleep, while Isaac listened to music on his earbuds.

The SUV was quiet except for the soft whir of the air-conditioning fans. Nova didn't like listening to music or talk radio when she drove; she preferred to focus on driving, which she took seriously. The SUV, some kind of luxury Mercedes and probably super expensive, belonged to Mackenna's wealthy family. At eighteen, Nova didn't have much driving experience. She was worried she'd

wreck the vehicle in a random accident, get everybody mad at her, and ruin her driving record before it had really started.

A petite five-two, Nova felt slightly ridiculous piloting such a massive beast of a vehicle, like a toad telling a dragon what to do. Still, they'd made it this far. They'd left Greenwood Village, a suburb in south Denver, later than planned, because predictably, Mackenna had shown up late. Mackenna had driven for the first two hours, through the traffic of Denver and into the mountains, before asking Nova to take over. Nova protested, hoping Landon, Mackenna's boyfriend, or one of the other guys would take the wheel, but it turned out all three of the dudes had eaten marijuana gummies before they'd even left Greenwood Village. She should have known. This was their big end-of-summer road trip before returning to college, so naturally they'd be stoned from the get-go.

They'd all gone to the same prep academy in the Denver suburbs. Nova, a year younger than the others, had just enrolled as a freshman at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, where the others would be sophomores. Nova had told her parents she'd be spending the next three nights with Mackenna's entire family at a cabin in Vail. This was partially true—they were going to stay at *one* of the Wolcotts' cabins—but it was her family's cabin on Claw Heart Mountain, across the state border in Wyoming, and Mackenna's parents would not join them.

Nova didn't like lying to her sweet, trusting parents (and this trip was by far the largest lie Nova had ever told them) but she knew they would have said no. It was the end of a long summer for Nova—a summer that had started with getting dumped by her boyfriend—and she'd grown tired of hanging around her house and her lame suburban neighborhood, going for walks and eating her dad's overcooked barbecue. The memory of endless time on lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic still fresh (sometimes it felt like being stuck at home, bored, had been her entire teenage

life), by mid-August Nova had finally reached the point where she feared she'd wither away and die if she didn't go *somewhere*.

So, basically, Nova had lied to her parents to save her own life.  
Kind of.

Nova glanced at Mackenna, who was still absorbed in her phone. Mackenna was a tall, tan, volleyball-smashing Nordic beauty with a mane of curly blond hair that cascaded down her shoulders. Nova, with her pale skin, brown pixie-cut hair, dark eyebrows, hazel eyes, stubby nose, and short chin, thought she resembled a woodland elf more than anything an average person would consider "sexy."

Which was fine with her. The attention Mackenna attracted, both in high school and the real world, from all kinds of people, seemed like a huge pain in the ass. Nova would much rather float under the sexiness radar, free to live her life without everyone drooling over her all the time.

Mackenna looked up from her phone. "What?"

Nova looked away and focused on the road. "Nothing."

They weren't far across the border into Wyoming, maybe thirty miles, but Claw Heart Mountain already seemed different from the mountains in Colorado. Its outline appeared indefinite, its edges somehow blurry. Which didn't really make sense, because like the mountains in Colorado, Claw Heart must have been a part of the Rocky Mountains, which stretched all the way from New Mexico into Canada.

Mackenna leaned forward against her seat belt and peered through the windshield. She drummed her hands on the SUV's dashboard.

"Huh. Claw Heart looks even more badass than I remember."

"How long has it been since you've been here?"

Mackenna tilted her head, thinking. "Last summer, I guess."

"You haven't been to your own cabin for an entire year?"

“We used to come here more often, but that was before we got the second cabin in Vail. Now Dad mostly uses this one for hanging out with his business buddies and entertaining clients. Claw Heart Mountain’s good for hunting. Dad pays a neighbor to look after it for most of the year.”

“So why aren’t we just going to Vail?”

Mackenna wrinkled her nose. “It’s being fumigated. Mom saw a cockroach when she was there last weekend for her book-club retreat.”

“Vail cabin problems, huh?”

Mackenna sat back and sighed. “I know, right?”

Nova glanced in the rearview mirror. The dudes were all oblivious—eyes closed, ears stuffed with earbuds, minds still buzzed. Nova felt like a mom driving her kids to summer camp. For the seventh or eighth time that day, she wondered why she was even friends with these people. Or friends with Mackenna, anyway, since Nova hardly knew the dudes at all. Landon, with his good looks and blond, fake bedhead hair, was hot but sort of dumb, the kind of guy she’d normally ignore and be ignored by, the average Great White Bro. Isaac was smart but mean, a handsome Jewish kid with piercing brown eyes. Wyatt was probably the nicest of them, a genuinely sweet Black guy with a big smile. He’d moved to Colorado from Minneapolis three years earlier and didn’t seem worried about being popular, which, of course, made him super popular.

Nova swerved to avoid a dead critter in the road. It had exploded all over the place and was unrecognizable. Nova felt her heart go out to the creature, whatever it had been, and straightened in the driver’s seat, determined to avoid any further roadkill. The highway sloped sharply upward as they reached the base of the mountain and climbed the first length of a switchback highway, which appeared to zigzag all the way up the mountain.

Isaac removed his earbuds and leaned forward from the backseat. Nova could smell his cologne, a subtle musk that made her think of a dim coatroom at a cocktail party.

Isaac pointed at the windshield. “What the hell is that?”

Nova frowned and examined the road. It took her a moment to see what Isaac was pointing at because it was light blue, almost the same color as the sky. It was a brick-shaped armored van, lying upside down on the road, wheels in the air. The van’s small side windows had shattered, and its roof was crunched.

“Holy shit,” Mackenna said, lowering her phone. “Looks like an accident.”

Nova stopped twenty yards from the overturned van. She put the SUV in park, rolled down her window, and stuck her head out to look at the armored van and then up the mountain. A path of broken trees and torn earth went straight up, maybe a hundred yards, to the next switchback tract of highway. A haze of dirt hung in the air, still filtering down from above. Nova sat back and turned to Isaac and Mackenna. Landon and Wyatt were still sleeping in the backseat, oblivious.

“They fell,” Nova said.

Mackenna blinked. “What?”

“They fell down the mountain.”

“Whoa,” Isaac said, sitting back and rolling down his window. The smell of gasoline drifted into the SUV and Nova pulled to the side of the road in front of the overturned vehicle. She thought back to her excruciatingly dull driver’s ed classes and activated the SUV’s flashers.

She wondered if they had a road kit. They could light some road flares and set up a warning lane. They needed to call 911. They had to check for survivors.

Nova put the SUV in park. She noticed her hands were trembling and rubbed them together, as if the conductive heat would

offset the trembling. She unbuckled her seat belt and opened her door.

“What are you doing?” Mackenna asked.

“We have to help. We might need to give them first aid.”

“But this is so . . . dangerous. This road is super narrow. What if a semitruck comes along and smashes us too?”

“We’ll be fast.”

“We will?”

Nova nodded, feeling a surge of adrenalin. This was finally it. A real-life important adult-type situation. An adventure. Nova got out of the SUV and slid around on the loose rock that had been sprayed across the highway. She peered up the mountainside, checking to see if anything else was poised to come crashing down to the highway. She noticed a disturbance among the trees. Something enormous was moving through the shadows—something almost as tall as the trees themselves—but it appeared to be headed farther up the mountain, not down, and within a few seconds its shape disappeared into the trees altogether, leaving Nova wondering if she’d really seen anything at all.

Shaking off the unsettling vision, Nova ran up to the front of the overturned van. The side of the van read STEEL CAGE ARMORED SERVICES. Gasoline was pooling around the van, its surface a hypnotic sheen of purple and blues. The smell was so strong it made her dizzy.

Nova got down on her hands and knees and crawled closer, trying to get a better look inside the van. Both front seats were empty, as was the rest of the van’s cab. A steel partition wall, still intact, blocked off the rear cargo area of the van.

Nova scrambled to her feet and brushed the road grit from her pants. Isaac and Mackenna had exited the SUV along with Landon and Wyatt, who both looked dazed and confused after their edible nap.

## CLAW HEART MOUNTAIN

Nova went around to the back of the van. Its rear doors had buckled and one thick steel door was wedged open about two feet. Nova pulled on the door to increase the gap, but it wouldn't budge. She shouted hello into the opening. No response. She turned on her cell phone's LED flashlight and shined it into the darkness beyond.



# 2

NOVA HAD EXPECTED TO FIND THE ARMORED VAN'S DRIVER HURT, maybe even dead, but no one was in the back. Instead, she found the shattered fragments of a wooden pallet and a large green-and-white cube wrapped in clear, industrial-strength packaging film. Through the film, Nova could make out stacks of paper bound into packets.

It was a cube of money.

So.

Much.

Money.

"Nova? What is it?"

When Mackenna approached, Nova instinctively shielded the van's opening as best she could with her body, but Mackenna was taller and peered over the top of her head.

"Holy fuck." Mackenna gasped and gripped Nova's shoulders.

"It might be fake," Nova said, half hoping this was true.

This was too much. This was too much of a thing. She could already feel the energy caused by the sight of the money cube radiating from Mackenna's fingertips clawing into her shoulders. It was a wild, hungry energy. A crazy energy.

"It's not fake," Mackenna said, starting to bop up and down. "I know cash when I see it. That's real money, Nova. Fucking real money!"

Nova stepped through the two-foot gap between the van's jammed door and its frame, shining her phone's light in front of her. Jagged shards of wood, the smashed remains of the pallet, were covering the cargo hold like confetti. Nova leaned down and picked up a piece. It looked like a huge toothpick, or a knife. She looked at Mackenna.

"Where'd the driver go?"

Mackenna shrugged. "Maybe they walked away to get help."

"I doubt it. Would you leave all this money behind?"

"Hell no."

"I wouldn't either. I'd wait for help to come along."

Mackenna turned. The highway was still quiet behind them. "It seems so deserted out here," Mackenna said, putting her hair back in a ponytail. "I still don't see anybody coming in either direction. Maybe they didn't want to wait for somebody to come along. Maybe they couldn't wait."

Nova heard Isaac's voice coming from outside the van, asking what was going on. His head popped into the doorway a second later. He looked at Nova crouched with the wooden shard in her hand and the cube of money behind her.

"Is that . . .?"

Nova shrugged. She poked into the plastic with the shard, gouging a hole into its clear surface.

Maybe the money was fake. Maybe this was some kind of elaborate prank.

Once she'd made an opening in the packaging wrap, Nova pulled out a single bundle of cash, which was held together by a white paper band with yellow edging that had **\$10,000** printed on it. She ran her thumb against the edge of bundle, examining the bills.

"Are those all hundred-dollar bills?" Isaac asked.

"They feel real," Nova admitted, holding the bills up to her eye and focusing the light of her cell phone on them. "They look real."

Mackenna slipped her hand through the cargo-hold doorway. She moved fast, like a snake striking its prey. She had those athletic fast-twitch skills.

"Here. Let me see."

Nova looked at her friend, hesitating. Since Nova had first peeked into the back of the armored van, a cold, uneasy feeling had steadily been growing in her heart. Mackenna saw the hesitation in Nova's eyes and darted forward, snatching the packet of money from Nova's hand.

"Hey!"

Mackenna thumbed through the money, while Isaac stepped back from the doorway and shouted to the other dudes to come quick. Nova stood up and exited the upside-down cargo hold, returning to the world of wind and heat and fading sunlight. Even though they had barely started up the mountain, she could already see far across the plain below. Mackenna was right. No other vehicles were in sight for miles. Nova had never seen such a deserted stretch of highway. She peered up the mountainside and checked for traffic coming from higher up. Nothing moved. All she could hear was the wind, rustling the trees.

Landon and Wyatt came around to the back of the van. They looked at Mackenna, who was grinning and slapping the bundle of cash against her palm, her eyes gleaming with manic joy.

"It's our lucky day, fuckers."

The guys each grabbed a bundle of cash and thumbed through it themselves. It was surreal. Everyone except Nova was now holding ten thousand dollars in cash by the side of the road, in broad daylight. The van still smelled like gas, but at least it hadn't blown up. Yet. She wondered what it would be like to watch the cube burn. Millions of dollars igniting in a hot blaze. You'd be able to see smoke rising from the valley below, maybe all the way to the last town they'd passed through twenty miles ago.

What was that town called again? Some kind of insect?

Oh yeah.

Scorpion. Scorpion Creek.

"This isn't our money," Nova said, patting the side of the armored van. "We can't just take it."

Mackenna snorted and looked around, shielding her eyes with the flat of her hand. "Well, I don't see anybody around, do you? Haven't you ever heard of finders keepers?"

"This is a lot of money," Landon said. "This is so much money."

Isaac smirked. "Thanks, Captain Obvious. Nobody else here noticed that."

"We'll never need to work again," Wyatt said, his eyes foggy at this idea. "Even after splitting it five ways. We could pay our student loans. We could all buy our own mansion with a swimming pool."

"Shit," Landon said, "my family already has a swimming pool. I'm going to buy my own private plane and travel around the world."

"You mean, *we'll* travel around the world," Mackenna said, putting her arms around Landon's neck and kissing him. "We'll be a millionaire power couple. How fun will that be?"

Isaac poked his head into the back of the van again. “Nova’s right, though,” he said, his voice muffled. “This isn’t our money. If we take it, somebody will come looking for it, sooner or later. The armored-van company probably has its own detectives.”

“How do you know that?” Mackenna said. “You don’t know.”

Isaac stared back at the group.

“Have you ever heard the expression “Nothing in life is free”? This random van stuffed with cash probably is included in that.”

“Shit, why are you fighting this, dude?” Landon asked, scratching the side of his head. “Is it because you’re Jewish?”

Wyatt laughed. “Oh fuck. Landon’s racist. I knew it.”

“I just meant, are you worried about the stereotype,” Landon said, looking sheepish. “About how Jews love money so much. Like, are you worried about reinforcing it?”

Wyatt laughed again and slapped Isaac on the back.

Isaac rolled his eyes. “No, dipshit. I’m not worried about reinforcing Jewish stereotypes. Also, fun fact: everyone loves money. Our stereotype is more about how good we are at handling it, fuckface.”

“Oh. Right.”

Mackenna clapped her hands. “Hey, I know! How about we stand around with our thumbs up our butts until another car comes along and sees us? How about we do that, huh?”

They looked at each other. Wyatt cleared his throat and Nova knew what he was going to say before he said it. She’d known this suggestion would be inevitable since the moment she’d first argued the money wasn’t theirs. It was how groups of people had been making huge mistakes since the beginning of time.

“Okay,” Wyatt said, raising his arm in the air. “Let’s take a vote.”



# 3

BANNOCK ADDED MORE WOOD TO THE FIREPLACE IN HIS STUDY. Even though it was a warm summer afternoon in Utah, he liked the firelight and the company it provided as the wood was slowly consumed. He thought watching a fire burn was a good lesson in the impermanence of all things, how even the brightest flames went out, sooner or later. You didn't have to do anything. You just had to wait for time to do its work.

An electronic ringing came from the walnut desk in Bannock's study. He frowned, displeased with the interruption. He got up from his chair by the fire and walked over to his desk. He pulled out the center drawer and dug in a pile of prepaid cell phones until he located the one that was chirping at him. He answered the call, his gaze settling on the fire crackling across the room.

"Hello."

"We need your help. A delivery has been waylaid on its way back from the cleaners."

“By whom?”

“We don’t know. The GPS beacon stopped moving in Wyoming thirty minutes ago, and we can’t get the transport crew on the phone. They were going through Claw Heart Mountain, twenty miles west of a town called Scorpion Creek.”

Bannock grunted. He’d heard of Claw Heart but had never been there. It was supposed to be good hunting. Full of a variety of game. Rich assholes went there to spend the day getting drunk and shooting guns. Occasionally they got drunk enough to shoot each other and you’d read about it in the news. Personally, Bannock loved fishing and hunting in the mountains. He loved being alone. He loved finding the tracks of some animal, big or small, and following them for as far as he could. He’d once followed bear tracks all the way up a mountain in northern Idaho for two days, until he came to the bear’s den, where it was preparing to wait out the winter with her two cubs. He’d slaughtered them all with his rifle—the mamma black bear as it charged him and then the two cubs as they huddled together, bleating in their terror and confusion. He’d field dressed one of the cubs right outside the cave, and the skinned bear cub had born an uncanny resemblance to a small human being. Bannock had cooked the bear slowly beneath the stars, feeling like a god walking the earth.

A lot of people didn’t like bear meat, but Bannock liked every kind of meat.

Especially if he killed it himself.

“We’ve already sent a driver. His name is Gideon. He’ll arrive in twenty minutes. You should make it to Claw Heart in under five hours.”

Bannock scratched his shoulder, still gazing into the fire across the room. He was a lean, weathered Caucasian man in his mid-fifties, but his skin was a burnt-ochre red from a lifetime of exposure to vast quantities of sunlight all over the world.

“I work alone. You know this.” Not only did he work alone but he also lived alone, fifteen miles southeast of Salt Lake City.

“We understand. But this was a significant delivery. You will need assistance moving it, once you find it. And it is unclear who intercepted it. You might need the support.”

Bannock considered refusing the job and returning to his crackling fire. He’d been planning on reading Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This would be the sixth time he’d read it. He enjoyed how it captured the brutality of war and the necessity of dynamite.

“We’ll pay you two million.”

The firewood shifted in the fireplace, collapsing inward and sending a few harmless sparks sailing into the air. Bannock imagined the outline of Claw Heart Mountain. Well, it wouldn’t hurt to take a look. Perhaps the mountain had more wilderness still bottled inside than he thought. Perhaps he would enjoy himself.

“Okay,” Bannock said. He terminated the call and disassembled the burner phone, snapping it into pieces. He returned to the fireplace and tossed the phone fragments into the fire. The plastic burned with an unnatural blue light, and acrid black smoke rolled up from the fireplace and curled into the air.

Bannock didn’t mind the smoke. He’d smelled a lot worse things burning in his life.

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Switching into go-mode, Bannock doused the fire in his study with water and retrieved a black duffel bag from the wall safe in his bedroom. The contents of the bag were heavy and clanked against each other as Bannock set it down and unzipped it. The duffel contained a sheathed combat knife, a hatchet, a scalpel, nylon rope, duct tape, a handsaw, a flathead screwdriver, needle-nose

pliers, a circular saw, two extension cords, a ball peen hammer, a mini-flashlight, a box of disposable latex gloves, a box of disposable face masks, a six-pack of plastic face shields, a pack of hand towels, a medical kit, and a bag of plastic zip cuffs. Also included in the bag was Bannock's favorite weapon: a takedown recurve bow-and-arrow set in a canvas carrying case of its own, the bow currently disassembled.

Bannock returned to his wall safe and retrieved two handguns: an untraceable SIG Sauer P226 that had been in his private collection for decades and a reliable Berretta M9, also untraceable. Both guns were already loaded. Bannock added the weapons to his work bag, along with some extra boxes of ammunition and a small backpack containing three days' worth of clothes and toiletries. He didn't expect this assignment to take three days, but it didn't hurt to be prepared, especially if his clothing happened to get stained with blood.

Bannock zipped up the bag and carried it out to the front hall of his house. He peered through a window and scanned the street. It'd been six minutes since he'd ended the call with his employer and destroyed the burner phone. His ride was due in fourteen minutes. The street outside his small bungalow was quiet and saturated with sunlight. Bannock liked living in Utah. He liked the dry heat and the blowing wind—

Bannock went still. He'd seen a flash of unusual movement on the rooftop of the ranch-style house across the street. Something unusual popping up along the roofline and dropping out of sight almost as quickly.

It had almost been . . . tubular shaped. Black, yet glinting in the sunlight. Perhaps metal.

Bannock crouched so he was clear of the windows and unzipped his work bag. He pulled on a pair of disposable latex gloves. He ignored the two handguns and selected the combat knife—a

twelve-inch fixed blade—and, still sheathed, stuck it into his waistband. He dropped to the floor, army crawling across his living room and down the main hallway of his bungalow. He stood as he entered his kitchen and went to the back door. He pressed his ear against the door and listened. When he didn't hear anything, he unlocked the door and flung it open, stepping back and withdrawing from the line of fire.

No gunshots. No assholes in commando gear burst through the doorway, spraying his kitchen with bullets or tossing flash grenades. Bannock waited thirty seconds before stepping into his backyard. The summer heat washed over him and the sunlight was near blinding.

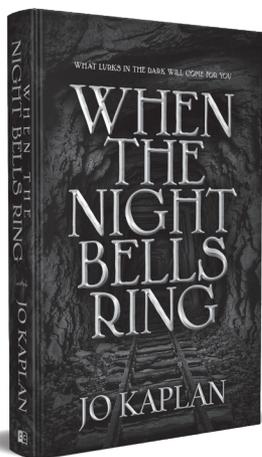
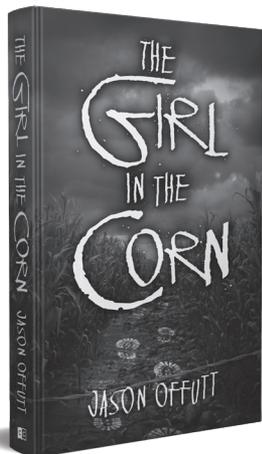
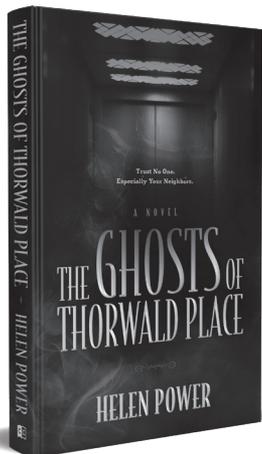
Still no gunfire, though, which meant his visitor was likely working solo and hoping the element of surprise would be enough. He wouldn't be the first challenger to underestimate Bannock. They came to him every two or three years, popping up whenever somebody from his past chanced on a piece of lucky intel and sought revenge for some ancient grievance Bannock could barely recall. These would-be assassins were part of the tiresome cycle of Bannock's trade, freelancers hired to take out other freelancers. They were all pawns, like Bannock himself, sent forth into battle by the dirty money that ran the world.

Bannock crossed his backyard in a straight line, using his house to shield himself from the street. He unbolted the door in the rear fence, slipped into the alley, and closed the door behind him. He walked down the alley until he reached the end of his block and turned left. He tried to move naturally, like a standard civilian out for an afternoon stroll. He encountered no fellow pedestrians, though two vehicles did drive past. He crossed the street that ran along the front of his house without breaking stride. When he came to another alley, he turned left again. The ranch house was five houses down.



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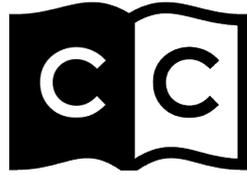
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# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN GOOD PEOPLE MAKE ONE BAD DECISION?

Imagine you are on the way to a remote mountain cabin with your friends. Upon arrival, you discover an abandoned armored van with fifteen million dollars on board.

**Would you take the money?**

Nova and her friends answer with a resounding yes. Perhaps their answer would have been different had they known that a professional killer was already tracking down the money. Or that a legendary creature known as the Wraith roams the mountain, ravenous with hunger.

Thinking they're safe and anonymous, Nova and her friends divvy up the stolen cash, unaware who or what is after them, unaware that soon they will be fighting for their lives.

*Something hungry has woken on  
Claw Heart Mountain . . .*

  
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