



# Three

August, 1996

*Vultures were circling above  
Woody Ridge, visible against the sky  
from road 231 as it passed through  
Mill Park. A fawn killed by coyotes?  
Archery elk season had opened at dawn  
on Friday—it might be an elk wounded  
by a bow hunter too lazy to track it  
and finish the job. She hated it when  
she came across one of those.*

If it was an abandoned throw-down camp with garbage and dirty Pampers, she'd look for any ID and report the slobs to Meg. All summer she'd driven around the south end in a Forest Service rig, looking for people she could talk to about being careful with fire and packing up trash before they went back to the city. Some of them cleaned the site better than they'd found it. Others had closed down their brains when they turned off pavement. She was tired of coming on a camp site and finding garbage tossed everywhere, spoiling a perfectly nice place. It made her mad enough to spit *tacks*, as Grandma used to say.

Road 535 faced across open meadow and open air, right toward the vultures—she estimated they were three miles away. She'd have to go and look, it was part of the patrol job, but after the rains last week, Mill Park would be boggy. A one-ton truck with a 200 gallon water tank mounted on the back was heavy in mud, and dual rear wheels weren't much help if the mud was deep. She turned around and drove back to the two-track that took off on high ground. It was a horrible road but hey, at least it would be dry.

Jake Holding was supposed to be bow hunting close to where Woody Ridge dropped off. He'd left after work on Thursday so at first light he could be in position for a kill. She could do without running into him, he'd be furious because he didn't have his elk yet after four days and ready to take it out on anyone in sight.

For weeks he'd boasted around the station, jeering at men who went out in groups with rifles, and getting away with it because he was the engine boss. "Hunting isn't some boy scout picnic. You want to be a real hunter, you go by yourself. Only a fool who's dumb or drunk goes after elk in a crowd."

One thing you could say about Jake, he knew how to make work miserable for other people. That awful day last week when her truck was in the shop, she'd had to double up with him to respond to a fire at L.O. Pocket. He drove like a maniac, hit bumps hard, skidded around corners and fishtailed in the gravel. Finally she said, "Jeesh, Jake, slow down." He set his mouth in a hard line and drove even faster.

He'd been on her case all summer, criticizing everything she said on the radio. "Did it occur to you that it wasn't your place to request Engine 3-4? It's up to the dispatcher to decide who's going to be sent out to assist you on a fire."

"I'd just left them building fence at Fernow. I knew they were close."

"I *said*, you ask for an engine if it's too much for you, but not Engine 3-4 or anybody else in particular." Then he turned and strutted away and left her standing there wanting to throw something after him.

The engine people had told her that every now and then Jake got it in for somebody like a brain spasm and never let up. They were glad it wasn't one of them this year. Next season it would be somebody else who'd want to kill him.

The road was dry but so rocky and rutted that she was jolted, even at ten-fifteen miles an hour. Land was fairly flat with open little meadows deep in grass and sunshine. Basalt cap in there, probably from the Woody Mountain vent a couple of million years ago, that explained the shallow-rooted pine monoculture. Good country for elk, which was probably why Jake had put in for Unit 6B.

Hardly anyone camped back there. Most over-nighters stopped on the edge of Fry Park where they could see a long way. Or Fry Canyon—what a jammed-up mess that place could be on weekends. It looked as if only one vehicle had driven in since last Thursday's storm: raindrops had made tiny pits and wiped the road clean for a while, but there was one set of tracks in the dirt.

All those little trails that took off to the left had tricked her before—she stopped to look at the map. She should be close to Black Tank by now, where that big blow-down pine nearly blocked the road. Her wheels spun as she put the truck in gear and started on. OK, there were blue paint slashes on the trees; she was into the state timber sale. And there was Black Tank, full of water. Above the trees she could still see the vultures.

It really was peaceful, land dappled by sun and shade, birds singing. Not spectacular country where you could see for miles or where earth fell away at your feet into a canyon. Just nice, the forest alive and breathing. She liked the smell of the air through her open window. Probably the section had been hammered by loggers eighty years earlier, but they'd left more trees than in other places, yellow-brown giants that grew far up into the air, so strong only the smaller branches moved in the wind.

Big cumulus were already piling high, but they might not mean an afternoon storm, the bottoms weren't flat and black yet. What a job, driving around in the forest and taking care of it. Only five more working days though, and she'd be in class. She'd already given notice: available on weekends through hunting and wood-cutting season if they wanted her, but Monday to Friday she'd be at NAU all day. Jake had sneered about "stinking students" who couldn't last out the season. OK, fine. She was going anyway.

She bounced past Bob's Tank, close now to whatever the vultures were interested in. They were just above the trees ahead, graceful,

resting in the air on their big wings, tip feathers up. One set of tire tracks went on ahead of her.

Through the trees she could see a patch of red, the side of a pick-up truck—it looked like Jake’s. He said he wouldn’t have anything lighter than a half-ton so he could carry elk home. Maybe that was what the vultures were seeing, part of a dead elk. Jake could be off somewhere bringing the rest in, even *he* couldn’t carry a whole elk alone. The tracks in the dirt turned right to the truck.

You didn’t want to be out in the open if you were alone with Jake. She stopped and locked the door before she heard the flies, all over the mound of a blue sleeping bag on the ground beside the truck. Then the horrible stink hit and went to the back of her throat.

She got the window rolled up fast. Oh god, the smell, heavy in her mouth. She coughed and couldn’t get it out. Flies were thick on the sleeping bag, crawling on a head—she could see the hair.

Her hands shook as she fumbled the mike loose from the radio and pressed the key. “Flagstaff...” Her voice broke. Wait, she needed the map. Her fingers were numb—the map fought being unrolled. “Flagstaff, Patrol 3-4.”

“Patrol 3-4, Flagstaff.”

“Requesting law enforcement and, uh, and a coroner. My location is 20 north, 6 east, uhm, hold on—section 33.” She stopped to control the shaking in her voice.

“What’s the nature of the problem?”

“I have a fatality here involving a Forest Service employee.” They’d all know who it was; he’d told people at the station where he’d be.

“Copy. Don’t disturb the scene.”

No chance she’d go near *that*. “I’ll hike back and flag the way in.”

She took a roll of pink ribbon, held her breath, threw open the door and slammed it as she took off. When she was back along the road with both trucks out of sight, she sat down on a fallen tree and hugged the pain in her chest. Not for Jake, turned into a horror. It was just—it was death. She didn’t want any more death.

Her grandfather had been young and strong in photographs, but he faded into defeat and frailty and death after he’d lost his ranch to the bank. She wished she could buy it back and put him there again with Grandma, and everything would always be the same as it was when he was fifty.

*A*t her desk in town Meg was finishing paperwork. It had been the week the public went crazy in the forest. Files were piled on her desk.

Six hours of sleep all weekend. She'd no more than cleared off two lost children, envelopes with addresses in garbage left at a throw-down campsite, and a fight between drunks at Bonita campground than she'd dealt with money stolen from a fee box. At Harding Point there'd been a report of someone firing a machine gun. Fun, she was in touch with humans at their best. At least she wasn't city PD, that would be worse.

Other districts had requested help from forest law enforcement. Three teenagers had shot up a market at Munds Park—the sheriff needed blockades on both ends of road 240. A shot had been fired through a tent at Blue Ridge Reservoir. There'd been trouble at Cave Spring, campers refusing to move.

Ugh: preliminary investigation and securing the scenes, talking with witnesses, taking evidence and photographs, issuing citations, all in full uniform with silver badge. It was the reports that wore her down, pages and pages, hours at the computer—synopsis of incident, statements from suspects, witness attachments, and no room anywhere for humor.

It wasn't that she was a wimp. She'd spent three summers on patrol, one on helattack, two on an engine and two on a Hot Shot crew: she was a tough westerner. But she did like a laugh now and *then*.

The Forest Service was big on integrating women—they'd suggested last summer that she apply for law enforcement training, and she'd been flattered. It would make her the first woman law enforcement officer on the forest. She'd gone out to the ranch and talked with her mother at the kitchen table.

"I've been reading up on it. The Forest Service has had to protect people and resources right from the beginning—the first rangers wore badges and guns. They could arrest violators of grazing and logging regulations, moonshiners during Prohibition, people who started fires, even shoot to kill in defense of human life."

"I remember a case right around here, your grandmother told me about it. The ranger was not charged, as I remember. Cookies?"

"Sure. Now the big problem is crowd control. Phoenix has grown until there's so much recreation use of the forests that local sheriffs can't handle the problems."

"I can believe it."

"We've got about a thousand Law Enforcement Officers nationally taking care of federal regulations, most of them transfers from Fire. For twenty years there've been some women doing the job."

Her mother had sighed. "There's a new breed of people out there, people who don't *work* around here. Milk?"

"Please. What do you think? Is it an off-the-wall idea for me?"

Mom had paused, still holding the milk bottle. “Well, I’ll give you my initial reaction. I’ve always thought you have a gift for making life delightful for yourself and everyone around you, like my mother did. It’s a rare talent. Maybe you could walk into a situation and de-fuse it, who knows? What that kind of thing would do to *you* is what concerns me, whether it would damage you, make you hard and cynical—people vary in their reactions to all kinds of things. I don’t see you as a cop.”

“I don’t think it’s a cop job exactly.”

“I know, luv. And I don’t doubt you’re strong and smart and brave enough to take on trouble. But I wonder whether you’d be happy as an *enforcer*. Did they think you could do it just because you’re six feet tall and you could shoot straight by the time you were ten?”

“Somebody has to do it.”

“To coin a phrase.” Mom had returned the milk bottle to the refrigerator.

“Somebody else, not me?”

“Meggie, it’s up to you. The job would be an education, that much is certain. Education is not to be sneezed at, it’s a way of growing. But some of the things I’ve learned I’d rather not have known.”

“We’d be in a terrible mess if there weren’t some kind of order.”

“Now we’re talking philosophy?”

“Yeah, like lots more money, I’d be a Forestry Technician GS 462.”

“If you take it, I’ll watch with real interest. You might run away the first week, you could last for years and never miss a joke, might even be good at it. You won’t know until you try, won’t know that about yourself.”

So she’d filled out the forms and gone through the background/criminal history investigation with no thought of the hours of desk work she was letting herself in for. Or of packing a sidearm everywhere she went. The job was so *serious*.

Nine weeks of training at the federal center in Georgia. Firearm qualification had been a snap. And take-downs: “Your foot goes here. Now, confidence! That’s right. Lean into it.” But not much had been said then about LEMARS paperwork.

The Law Enforcement Management Reporting System (LEMARS) is designed to provide management with a means to identify and follow law enforcement activities. It will provide a method to record and analyze incidents involving violations or suspected violations on National Forest System lands. The use of LEMARS is mandatory.