

vi·cious cir·cle
noun

- **1.** a sequence of reciprocal cause and effect in which two or more elements intensify and aggravate each other, leading inexorably to a worsening of the situation.

Part One

There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself.
- **Raymond Chandler**, *The Long Goodbye*

Chapter One

WYOMING GAME warden Joe Pickett flicked his eyes between the screen of the iPad mounted in front of him and the side window, as the vast dark pine forest spooled out beneath the Cessna Turbo 206 below. He tried to keep his eyes wide open so he wouldn't miss anything but he fought against his instinctive reaction to close them tightly in anticipation of the inevitable engine failure that would result in his quick and fiery death in the Bighorn Mountains.

For the first time in his life, he understood the desire for the fidgety solace of a set of prayer beads, and he wished he had some.

It was Halloween night, and the pilot, John Wilson "Bill" Slaughter, a stout and compact man in his early sixties with an aluminum-colored crew-cut, eased down the nose of the small plane. Black timber filled the windscreen. Joe tried to breathe.

"Twelve hundred feet," Slaughter said through the headset to both his co-pilot Gail Herdt and Joe who was looped in.

"Roger," she said.

Both Slaughter and Herdt were retired from the military as well as members of the Wyoming Civil Air Patrol. Herdt was an art teacher at Pinedale Middle School, and Slaughter had a small Angus cattle operation near Torrington.

"Why twelve hundred feet?" Joe asked, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

"We normally don't drop below two thousand feet at night," Herdt said calmly. "It's not considered very safe."

"So don't tell anyone," Slaughter said.

Joe asked, "Then why are we doing it?"

She looked over her shoulder at him alone in the backseat. "To see better," she said, matter-of-fact.

Joe nodded. His mouth was dry and he felt like he could throw up at any second. He gripped an overhead strap so hard with his right hand he'd lost all feeling in his fingers. His stomach surged with every turn, drop, and climb.

"Is he okay?" Slaughter asked Herdt.

"Are you okay?" she asked him directly.

"Dandy," he lied.

The crowns of lodgepole pines shot by below them so quickly it was mesmerizing. The crowns of the trees rose

from the inky forest and were illuminated light blue by the slice of moon and the hard white stars. The visual maelstrom of passing treetops reminded Joe of snow blowing through his headlights in a blizzard. The trees seemed to be so close he could reach out and touch them.

"We hardly ever crash," Bill Slaughter said.

Herdt laughed and told him to stop it.

Joe stared at the back of Slaughter's round head and tried to burn two holes in it with his eyes. Although he appreciated the time and effort that went into being members of the Civil Air Patrol, he didn't appreciate their black humor at the moment.

"So **WHAT'S** this guy likely to do if he finds himself lost?" Slaughter asked Joe through the headset.

"What do you mean?"

"Is he the kind of guy who panics?"

Joe thought about it. "No. He's too dumb to panic. And he does know these mountains pretty well. He used to guide hunters up here."

Slaughter said, "The reason I asked is that we've learned over the last few years that if the lost person is young, they start climbing to try to find a cell signal on the top of a mountain. If they're older, they tend to walk

down along a creek or stream."

"That makes sense," Joe said. "My guy would walk down. My guess is he'd follow a spring creek until it joined one of the forks of the Powder River. Then he'd find a ranch or another hunting camp. I could also see him breaking into a cabin or hunting trailer and going to sleep without even imagining that someone might be looking for him."

"Oh, great," Herdt said.

Said Joe, "What doesn't make any sense, though, is why he'd just walk away from his elk camp in the first place."

"I hope we find out what made him leave," Herdt said. "I'm always curious to find out how people get lost."

"It adds to our experience bank," Slaughter said. "We're constantly learning, all of us. The biggest thing I've learned is people do stupid things for not very good reasons."

"Sounds like him," Joe said.

Herdt chuckled.

"Hold it -- what's that?" Joe asked when the iPad screen suddenly filled with what looked like white upright sticks or chalk marks on a blackboard -- scores of them.

THEY WERE looking for a missing hunter named Dave

Farkus. Farkus was a former energy worker, former hunting outfitter, former fishing guide, and was currently an unemployed layabout collecting dubious disability checks. He'd been missing from his elk camp since twelve hours before. Because of a forecast of a massive fall blizzard on the way, the available time window to search for him was closing.

Farkus's hunting partner, Cotton Anderson -- a welder who'd recently lost his job due to the energy bust -- had called in the incident to Ten Sleep County Sheriff Mike Reed, who in turn called the Wyoming Office of Homeland Security, who called the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, who called the Joint Operating Center, who called the Wyoming Civil Air Patrol, a part of the National Guard, to look for the missing hunter.

Sheriff Reed told Joe that, according to Anderson, he'd returned to their camp the night before to find Farkus gone. Farkus's pickup was there, a fire had been built, and steaks were thawing on top of the cooler. Farkus's hunting rifle was leaning against a tree trunk and his holster and back-up handgun hung from a branch. A nest of empty Coors cans lay at the base of a camp chair and an opened can of beer was in the armrest. But no Farkus.

Joe knew no normal hunter would go out without his

rifle. And Farkus would *never* leave a full beer unless he had a desperate reason to do so.

Anderson tried to reach Farkus on his cell phone but there was no signal. Then he tried to radio him on his cheap Motorola walkie-talkie and finally received a reply.

At least he *thought* it was Farkus's scratchy voice that replied, twenty minutes after the first shout-out, "*They're after me...*"

But Anderson couldn't swear it was his buddy's voice. And he couldn't swear that the words weren't actually, "Bear with me," or "I have to pee."

Anderson had stayed up late drinking Jim Beam and fired a series of three rifle shots – the universal signal for "Come back to camp, you fool" -- but Farkus never responded with three shots of his own.

When Cotton Anderson emerged bleary-eyed from his tent at mid-morning and confirmed that Farkus hadn't come back during the night, he drove his pickup to the Crazy Woman Creek campground, where he received a cell phone signal and reported Dave Farkus missing to the Sheriff's Department.

Joe had been drafted to accompany the Civil Air Patrol because of his familiarity with the missing hunter. That Farkus had antagonized Joe for years was not apparently a consideration.

Joe was scared to fly in small planes. He preferred to conduct searches for missing hunters by horseback or ATV.

So when during its run-up the Cessna shivered and trembled on the concrete like his Labrador Daisy when she spied a pheasant, Joe silently prayed for his life and cursed Sheriff Reed for suggesting him to go on the air search and at the same time cursed Dave Farkus for getting lost.

NOT THAT Joe didn't want to locate Dave Farkus and talk to the man. He did. He'd been trying to reach him after Farkus left a very late-night message on his cell phone two nights before. The call had come from a phone with an UNKNOWN NUMBER designation, which was strange in itself.

An obviously inebriated Farkus had slurred a long but troubling voice message that had curdled Joe's stomach.

"Joe, this is Dave. Farkus. Dave Farkus. Dave Fuckin' Farkus, your pal from many an adventure.

"Anyway, I was closin' down the Stockman's Bar tonight and I heard something – overheard a conversation, I guess you'd say – that you would definitely be interested in because it was about you and your family. At least I'm pretty sure it was..."

In the background at the last few seconds of the voicemail, Joe heard a female voice say, "Okay, that's enough, damn you," and the call was abruptly terminated.

The message was still on his phone and Joe had listened to it three times with his wife Marybeth.

TREETOPS FLASHED by below the Cessna. Joe found he started to get dizzy if he stared straight down too long, so he tried to focus more on the big picture. Although he had spent weeks and months in his district and these mountains, he was taken aback how vast and complicated the terrain was.

The forest was checkerboarded with mountain meadows and occasional timbered squares. The folds of the black velvet contours gave way to violent gashes where small streams tumbled white over rocks. The remnants of the first snows already clung to the alpine slopes that were exposed to the north and draws that received very little sunlight.

The only artificial lights they'd seen came from isolated hunting camps or campgrounds. Elk season had opened earlier in the week and hunters were out in force. Joe had been patrolling fourteen hours a day since the opener and had issued two citations for game violations.

Adding to his normal duties was the distressing realization that a well-organized poaching ring was operating in his 5,000-square-mile district as well as the adjoining districts to the east and west. Callers to dispatch had reported seeing up to three shooters killing multiple antelope, deer, and elk in areas that were not yet open for hunting or at night.

Joe was particularly disturbed by the incidents because the killings seemed to be indiscriminate and the shooters atypical. Cow elk, calves, doe deer and antelope – it didn't seem to matter what species or sex were being targeted and taken. Usually, bad guys went after trophy animals, not anything and everything they came across. The evidence of an illegal trophy hunting was a decapitated carcass, since the shooter was only interested in the antlers or horns.

That wasn't occurring with this poaching ring because they were apparently loading up their carcasses and hauling them away instead of leaving the meat to rot in the field. That meant Joe couldn't do field necropsies on the dead game to find spent bullets that could be matched with specific weapons.

He'd traded notes with fellow game wardens in the adjoining districts and found out that similar reports had

come in near Gillette to the east and Jackson Hole to the west. Vague descriptions of two different vehicles – an older model red pickup and a four-by-four white Chevrolet Suburban – had been described at the scenes, which matched what Joe had heard.

Joe hated poachers and he wanted to find them and arrest them. He didn't like the idea of criminals operating with impunity in his backyard. But he'd been stymied for the past two months. There had been no tips from citizens as to the identity of any members of the ring, and literally no evidence on the ground to follow up on besides gut piles. The shooters apparently picked up their shell casings from the ground after firing, because none had been found. They hadn't opened themselves up to discovery, as often happened, by posting photos or videos of their crimes on the internet. And because the poachers were targeting non-trophy game, no taxidermists could report receiving suspicious heads and horns. Joe was vexed by the crimes and clueless in regard to the identity or motivation of the poaching ring. Even his agency director, Lisa Greene-Dempsey, had fired off several *What-are-you-doing-about-this-problem?* emails to him.

His best chance to catch the criminals was to increase the odds that he'd stumble across them while they were

shooting their targets, or else that a legitimate hunter would see them in the act and call it in -- and Joe could get to the location on time to arrest them. That was the main reason he'd been spending so much time on patrol, foregoing both weekends and holidays.

The adrenaline pumping through his body, as well as the buzz of the engine, kept him from realizing how bone-tired he was.

Or how cold. He wished now he'd accepted their offer of an insulated flight suit. Instead, he wore his red WG&F uniform shirt with the pronghorn antelope patch on the sleeve and his J. PICKETT, GAME WARDEN nametag and badge. He rubbed his hands briskly on his Wranglers to offset the icy leakage from the windows and a vent on the floor. He'd long before lost feeling in his feet.

SLAUGHTER HAD announced that there were a number of search patterns available -- grid-aligned, circle, creeping line, expanding square, parallel, route sector -- but that they were going to be using the expanding square. They'd started with the approximate coordinates of Farkus and Anderson's elk camp and were gradually flying further from its apex, utilizing sharp left turns.

"I wish more hunters carried PLB's" Slaughter

grumbled.

"Personal Locator Beacons," Herdt translated to Joe.

"I know what they are," he said. "We always recommend them to guys when they're in the field. But you know how it is -- no one ever thinks they're going to get lost."

"Do you have one?" Slaughter asked Joe.

Joe confessed that he had one but rarely remembered to take it along with him.

"Maybe someday we'll be searching for you," Slaughter said.

"Maybe," Joe agreed.

THE CESSNA was equipped with a FLIR, which Joe had learned was an acronym for "Forward Looking Infrared". The football-shaped device was mounted to the aircraft under the left wing, which is why Slaughter kept banking left on the expanding square. The FLIR detected the heat signatures of living creatures below and broadcast them onto the mounted iPads inside the cockpit.

Slaughter had told Joe the FLIR was sensitive enough to detect a still-warm fire ring or a lit cigarette if the surrounding temperature was cool enough -- even from thousands of feet in the sky. It could even show which specific vehicles had just arrived in a parking lot full of

thousands of them by the ghostly white glow of warm tires.

WHEN JOE saw those white hashmarks on the screen and asked, "What's that?" Slaughter said, "Elk."

"Elk?"

"Their coats insulate them so well they don't put out enough heat for the FLIR to pick up," Slaughter explained. "All you can see are their legs."

Joe leaned closer to the screen. Several of the chalk marks were moving. Then several of the animals broke into a run and peeled away from the herd. All he could see were disembodied white stick legs strobing through the trees.

"WE'VE GOT about ten more minutes of fuel before we need to head back," Slaughter announced over the intercom.

"Fine by me," Joe said.

"We've covered about sixty-four square miles around the elk camp," Herdt said, after checking their location against a topo map on her lap. She was using a yellow highlighter pen to recreate their pattern on the map.

What didn't need to be said was that if Farkus was actually down there, he hadn't shown up on the FLIR. Which meant he was no longer putting out any heat.

Which meant...

"Now what are we looking at?" Joe asked, pressing his index finger to the screen. "Another elk?"

The image was thicker, taller, and brighter white than the elk legs had been. Joe leaned over and looked out the side window. The timber was too thick below to see anything on the ground clearly.

Before he could speak up, Herdt said, "It looks like a man."

Not a man, exactly, Joe thought, but the negative white image of a man standing deep in the timber. Then he was gone.

"What just happened?" Joe asked.

"He stepped behind a tree," Herdt said. As the plane turned left, a shoulder appeared, as well as a foot at the base of the trunk. "He's trying to stay out of view."

Joe thought, *Why?*

"He can hear us flying around him, right?"

"You bet he can."

The screen went dark. "I lost him," Joe said.

Slaughter banked sharply and Joe felt his weight shift until he was pressed against the left door of the plane. He hoped it had a really good lock.

"There he is," Herdt said with triumph. Joe heard the sound of screen captures being made on her iPad.

But he still couldn't see anything but black on the screen.

Herdt twisted around and showed him how to use the side icons on the iPad to expand the field of vision until he could once again see the ghostly form trying to hide behind a tree. He pressed an icon that looked like crosshairs in a rifle scope to lock in on the figure. Despite the angle of the plane and constant vibration inside from the engine, the image was remarkably still and clear.

"Okay, I've got him again," Joe said. "Farkus, you idiot. Come on out."

"Coordinates," Slaughter said to Herdt in a stern military voice.

Herdt looked away from her iPad and called them out. Slaughter repeated them over the radio mike to the Joint Operations Center. That way, Sheriff Reed's Search and Rescue team knew where to locate Farkus on the ground. *If* it was Farkus.

"Why isn't he trying to get our attention?" Joe asked. "If that was me, I'd be jumping up and down waving my arms. What's wrong with him?"

Herdt said, "He might be injured."

"Sometimes," Slaughter added, "lost people get so

disoriented they try and hide from rescue attempts. It's bizarre, but it's happened before."

Joe shook his head, although he knew neither Slaughter nor Herdt could see him do it.

"Our work is done here," Slaughter said, and Joe felt the airplane level out and begin to gain altitude. Herdt was busy up front noting the coordinates in a spiral pad.

Joe was transfixed on the screen as the ghostly white figure got smaller.

At first, he thought there was a malfunction of some kind on the iPad when he caught a glimpse of four white smudges instead of just one.

He reached out and expanded the field of view. The figure they'd first seen -- whom they assumed was Farkus -- was clearly in the foreground. But beyond him were three other human images. They were advancing through the forest and converging on the lone figure.

"Look at the screen," Joe said.

"Come again?" Slaughter asked, irritation in his voice.

"Look at the screen."

Joe glanced up to see that Herdt had stopped writing and had manipulated her iPad until the four images appeared as well.

"What is going on?" Herdt asked.

"Three heat signatures are closing in on the one we found," Joe said.

They were so far away now that the white smudges were tiny and faint.

"Bill, we have to go back," Herdt said to her pilot.

"Negative," Slaughter said. "We barely have enough fuel to make it back to Saddlestring."

"Please, Bill?" she asked.

"Negative. I'm sorry. Maybe you're looking at the Search and Rescue team as they found him."

Joe didn't point out that Sheriff Reed's S&R team was still at their command post at the base of the mountain. If they'd moved out, he knew they would have heard it on the radio.

"If we could risk another pass, I would," Slaughter said. He sounded like he meant it. "We've accomplished our mission and found the guy. But we're in the danger zone of running out of fuel if we don't beat it straight back. I haven't seen any places in these mountains to try and land a plane."

"Okay," Herdt said, resigned. "Let's go home." She turned off her iPad and returned to her report.

Joe didn't want to get between them. And he couldn't

wait to get back on solid ground.

That's when he saw a star-shaped flash on the screen. Then another. Then a staccato burst of flashes that were faint and distant but distinct.

Joe thought, *flashlights?* But why would rescuers blink their beams at the man they were trying to save?

Then it hit him and he went cold. They were muzzle flashes.

"I think I just saw a murder," he said.

Herdt looked sharply around and Joe felt the wings waver slightly when what he'd said registered with Bill Slaughter.

Joe looked up from the screen and stared at nothing. In all of his years in the field, he'd never witnessed a murder. There was a lump in his throat and he felt guilty for cursing Farkus earlier. Farkus – or whoever he was – hadn't been hiding from the Cessna. He'd been hiding from the three men who were after him.

He knew there was little they could do – or have done -- given the circumstances. He also knew the images he'd just seen would stay with him for a very long time.

And he doubted he'd ever see Dave Farkus alive again.