PART ONE
If you’re not born in the Sacramento Valley, it takes a few years for you to know the first day of fall when it comes. I’ve lived here for over thirty years, about half my life. By now I’ve learned to read sights like the one that greeted my eyes when I walked out the door that morning—a dozen or so yellow spade-shaped leaves that had dropped from the fruitless mulberry that shades the driveway. We were well into Indian summer at the time. Here that means chilly mornings and warm afternoons, a sky full of tawny light, and very little wind. Those leaves hadn’t blown down. They had let go.

The temperature that morning was well above freezing, but still low enough that my old Pontiac Vera needed a little time to get warm. I got her running and left her to idle while I gathered up the fallen leaves and placed them around the base of one of my rosebushes, not thinking that those leaves might have some message for me about letting go, not thinking any such thing as I got my bike out of the garage and strapped it to the rack on Vera’s back bumper. By then she was ready to go.

I live in one of this area’s middle-aged neighborhoods, close to the west bank of the Sacramento River, opposite downtown. Within seconds of the merge into sluggish traffic Vera and I rose to cross the river. The view from the elevated freeway bridge was wide open, but I was galled this morning, as I had been for a long stretch of mornings, by what I couldn’t see. A decade before, when Jean and I had agreed to shack up at her place, I’d started making this commute. Back then I would look left from here, toward downtown Sacramento, and glimpse the white dome of
the Capitol. That old beauty was blocked now by a group of garish glassy towers bankrolled by the Hackenbills and the Venuttis, two local families who started competing in the seventies to see who could make the most money selling flimsy houses and good weather to water-guzzling, road-choking, air-polluting suckers from everywhere. As a non-native, my only claim is that I showed up here when there was still plenty of room. Back then, on a sunny morning like this, I’d have seen the Sierras bulked up along the rim of the eastern sky. Today the mountains were hidden behind the dingy veil of smog that thickened with each windless day.

My commute took me twenty miles east of the city, out where the land begins to wrinkle and tilt, climbing its bumpy way from the flat valley floor to the rolling hills above. The traffic on my side of the freeway thinned out once I was past downtown. I gave Vera plenty of gas and gripped the wheel tight, pulling left to counter her drift. Meanwhile, across the divider, the westbound lanes were crowded with newcomers all crawling in from the east. Yesterday a mountain lion had thinned their ranks by one. I confess that as I whizzed past them, I exulted a little. Such blatant poetic justice is hard to resist. Especially when your own prediction has come true, as mine had.

For years I’d been warning Jean that voting to protect mountain lions would have its consequences. So who could blame me if I’d been a little smug in bed that morning, as we were sipping our first cup of coffee and reading about the attack in the Bee.

When Jean saw the news she gasped. “Son of a bitch.”

_Son of a bitch, _she was saying, _what a grisly way to go._ But also: _Son of a bitch, Charlie was right._

“What do people expect?” I said.

She was quiet a minute, skimming the article over my shoulder. “So what happens now?”

“I suspect they’ll fix what’s left of her up so all her friends and family can get a last look. Then they’ll put her in a hole and say she’s gone to a better place.”
“Cut it out, Sayers,” Jean said. “What happens to the lion, I mean.”

“Oh, he’ll have to be shot—he’s unsocial. Not to mention ungrateful. Doesn’t he remember how you and a bunch of other folks voted to protect him?”

I reminded her that the protection wasn’t unconditional. “A lion steps out of line, he pays the price.”

“Pays how?”

I explained that some of my worthy colleagues at the Department of Wildlife were calling up the tracker right now. He would put his hounds on the scent and they’d track the killer down so he could be shot. “Later on the lion and the jogger will probably meet at the gates of heaven,” I said. “Unless the lion goes to hell. Which is where he belongs, I guess.”

“Or maybe their souls will transmigrate into each other,” she said, teasing me back. “The jogger will become a mountain lion. The lion will turn into a gal who jogs. Mother of two. Claims adjuster, doesn’t it say there?” She tapped the paper with her fingertip.

“Yes sir,” I declared after a minute, “this’ll get the Friends of the Mountain Lion scrambling. This is their biggest nightmare.” I was about to launch into a lecture on the shortsighted folly of the people I called the pumaphiles, who hadn’t foreseen this kind of trouble when they started campaigning to protect the beasts they adore. It was a diversionary tactic, and Jean saw right through it. She cut me off.

“The thing is, Charlie, it’s perfectly natural.”

“What is, protecting mountain lions so they can attack women who jog?”

“Charlie, I’m talking about death.”

“So am I.”

“Your death.”

“What, have you seen it lurking around?”

“No, I’ve been listening. To you. Talking about death all the time, and what comes after. It’s natural, you know.”
“What is?”
“Both. Death, and thinking about what comes after. Hoping something does.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, letting the paper fall in my lap. “Here I thought we were going to have a nice argument about wildlife management, a subject I know something about, and instead you want to discuss the unknowable.”

“It’s only unknowable if you let it be.”

“Says you, and which of the experts on the shelf in there?” I jerked my thumb towards the library across the hall from our room. A few months back I had relaxed a long-standing quarantine and let her assign me some books by a couple of the bestselling sages she reveres. I had been tickled by the reading, but not renewed, and this was still a sore point between us.

“If you want to be sarcastic, that’s your choice.”

“Sarcasm is one of the more hurtful mechanisms of defense,” I said, aping one of her pet authors.

“Another option is to control the situation.”

“Hey, now there’s a plan. Hello Mr. Reaper, glad to meet you. Charlie Sayers is the name, and I’m here to look you in the eye. You know what? You’re not as big and nasty as I thought you were.” I faked a sigh. “Gee, now I feel fine.”

Jean peeled the covers back and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She plucked the phone off her nightstand and punched numbers. “Just me,” she said to Nora, her mentor across the street. “Remember you told me to be on the lookout for the Aging, Raging Male? I think he’s here.”

It was true I’d forgotten how to satisfy her, but not how to make her mad. Maybe there was something hopeful in that. Who knows, I thought now, eyeing the traffic jam on my left, maybe there’s something hopeful in the lion attack too. Maybe it’ll wake them up. Maybe they’ll see it’s their own damn fault.

“Why?” I said aloud. (I often addressed this parade of enemies as I drove past them.) “Why is it your own fault? Because you wanted Eden, but no snake. You thought you could have it.”
I was getting into one of my prophetic moods. It was easy, the scene my windshield gave me was like something from a Hollywood Bible pageant, the technicolor caravan pouring down out of the brown hills as if to escape some scourge or plague. And I, all unheeded, took my bitter pleasure in remembering how it started. In the beginning was the army of earthmovers that rolled across the empty undulating spaces to flatten big patches out. When that was done they headed for the hills, blitzing the draws and canyons and clearing away the brush. Reinforcements swarmed in behind them to run pipe, lay pavement, string wire, and cut down inconvenient trees. Houses went up and these auto pilots to the left of me, after buying them, set to work beautifying their lots, putting lush lawns down, planting all kinds of young trees and shrubs. They marveled at the deer when they started to arrive. Beautiful creatures! What could make their garden more delightful? But deer must eat. And deer will be eaten, especially if you vote to protect the deer’s natural predator, the mighty mountain lion. I had no beef with the big cats. What bothered me was this other species, *homo dingus dongus*. In their natural state those hills were cougar country. The cougars had little really good habitat left, but plenty of food, so long as they didn’t mind keeping company with *homo dingus dongus*. But wait, why fault him? He means well. He bears no grudge against the cougar. Hell, he voted to protect the damn things. But did he ever think that cat might come back to bite the hand that shielded him? Of course he didn’t. For he is a near-sighted animal. His vision rarely reaches past the edge of his fastidious front lawn.

“HEY!” I shouted as I charged past, “WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THOSE BIG BROWN KITTIES NOW?”

The Aging, Raging Male. Hear him roar.