I was through roaring and ready for some distraction by the time I pulled into the Department of Wildlife’s regional headquarters, a ten-acre compound on the south bank of the American River. The compound sits less than three miles downriver from the spot on the bike trail where the lady jogger went down. I’d been stationed here for most of my thirty years in the department so I knew what the place looked like when something special was cooking. Green Wildlife trucks were all over the place, starting and stopping, roaring around. Little groups of guys, most of them rank and file, wearing the department’s green pants and short-sleeved khaki shirt (too macho for sweaters or jackets even on this chilly morning), were standing around explaining to each other what should be done about the mountain lion, glancing over their shoulders to see if they would be called upon to prove their courage and guile.

To those guys the lion attack was pure excitement. To me it was a sign of the times, Mother Nature exacting her revenge for decades of neglect and abuse. Another sign was Charlie Sayers driving past the beige aluminum building he used to park in front of. A storage site by this time, it once housed the lab where I had worked as biologist. I passed the second and third beige buildings, then turned in and parked before the fourth. This one was home to the department’s Office of Community Relations, where I’d worked since my lab closed down.

I went inside and followed the hall toward the offices of Hooked on Fishing. As soon as I saw my assistant Emilio I observed that lion fever was in full swing.
“You know it,” Emilio said. “This is one sick bunch of people. It’s like, celebration time. The big event, you know.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. The phone rang. Emilio picked it up and I stayed put through the short conversation, gathering from what he said and the way he moved his face that one of our volunteers was backing out.

“Somebody standing us up?” I asked after he’d hung up. I talked to his black, slicked-back hair because he was bent over his desk writing.

“You got it,” he said.

“For tomorrow?”

He looked up. “Right again.”

“Well, who are the alternates? Guess we’ll have to call one of them.”

Emilio shook his head. A tolerant smile creased the perfectly clipped lines that ran between his mustache and goatee. “This is the Sutter Heights kids, Charlie. Lot of people are scared to teach a little welfare kid to fish. We can barely get enough volunteers for this group in the first place. We never get extras.”

I pondered the problem a moment. “Why don’t I do it?” I said, surprising us both. “Make myself useful for a change.”

“Hey, Charlie. All right. Now, if I was you I’d take the day off. You’re not going to get nothing done.”

“What else is new?” I said.

Letting this pass, he announced that the day’s two meetings had already been canceled. Nobody wanted to miss a chance at being in on the mountain lion action.

Nobody but me.

I crossed the hall to my office, and after closing the door went straight to the big window behind my desk chair. Standing there, gazing out across the fish hatchery’s rows of rectangular cement ponds, two acres that teemed with trout, I started trying to remember some of the phrases I had come up with in the latest version of my resignation letter. After a minute I reached for the cord and flapped shut the slats of the venetian blind. I glanced at
my shut door and then unlocked the bottom right-hand drawer of my desk. Beneath a stack of virgin Department of Wildlife letterhead lay the envelope I was after, addressed to the department’s regional supervisor. I tore it open.

I had labored over this version of the letter all through the week. Yesterday evening, Thursday, I’d stayed late to type it out on Emilio’s machine. I remembered being pleased with it, thinking I’d come closer than I had with any of the other dozen or so drafts to saying exactly what had to be said. But as I read it over now I saw I was badly mistaken. The problem was as plain to me as it would have been to my old grandpa. He’d have taken one look at this letter and told me to quit my bellyaching. He’d have been right.

I didn’t actually start to complain until the bottom of the second page. Before that it was just a lot of winding up. I guess I was trying to tenderize the supervisor by showing him I knew his point of view, I understood all his arguments, had thought them over carefully, and now wanted to advance some ideas of my own. The first paragraph was polite enough to make a person sick. There I acknowledged the budget crisis the department gave as its reason for closing the lab. I didn’t dispute for one minute that there had been a crisis. Sales of fishing and hunting licenses, our main source of funds, had been falling for years. I assured the supervisor I was aware of this. I chalked it up to social change, rods and guns losing favor to skis and racquets and balls and boards. “The pioneer spirit flickering out,” is how I put it. How cute.

In the second paragraph I turned to a couple of years before, when department coffers were so low they could barely get salaries paid. After making payroll they had little left to cover the costs of operating. I reported that in my fish disease lab we were spending a lot of time sitting on our hands. No good for the department, no good for the biologists. Next I reviewed the drastic measures the department started taking—a swipe here, a slash there. I’d been disappointed my lab would fold, I admitted, but I told the supervisor
I appreciated their offering me a choice between early retirement and a change of positions.

Next I lied, saying how delighted I was when they sent me to Community Relations, where they named me head of Hooked on Fishing, a brand new program. The truth was I couldn’t have cared less about fishing than I did right then. But it wasn’t the department’s fault I’d gone sour on fishing. And they couldn’t help it if I had no head for administration. What upset me was the way they’d sacked the lab. The whole thing had gone down in secret: they’d excluded me and my colleagues from every single talk. Which is what I wanted to gripe about in my resignation letter, if I could ever figure out how to do it without the lengthy preamble. Send this draft, and the supervisor would die of boredom before he finished unwrapping the bomb.

I took a pen from the jar on my desk and started working back through the first paragraph, crossing most of it out. I was on my way into the second paragraph when I heard a familiar voice out in the hall. Before I could stow the papers safely Don Mackey had barged into my office and was thundering toward me, his big purplish head making me think as usual of a hippo’s, the eyes small and set back, the nostrils large and thrust forward, a collar of tough loose skin sagging around the neck.

“Sayers,” he rumbled, “I hear you got pussy problems out this way.”

Anyone else I would have scolded for not knocking. But Mackey and I had worked in the lab together twenty-five years. We’d never been big on manners over there.

“Big ones,” I said.

One thing I’d always enjoyed about Don was how deeply laughter altered him. Right now it set his neck-skin waggling. It made his shoulders rise and his eyes disappear and his purple color darken fiercely.

“Well what are you doing just sitting there?” he said when the eruption was over. “I thought this frigging cat would have
you people jumping in Community Relations, earning your damn keep for a change.”

If the last part of this came out sounding more bitter than funny, that was because Don had been wounded deeply when the lab closed down. He’d gone for early retirement and it shocked him when I made the shift.

“Peg give you time off for good behavior,” I said, “or did you finish building that bridge across the fake creek she had you dig in the back yard?”

When Don hits you, it’s best to hit right back. This much I’d learned in twenty-five years. I also had a pretty good handle on his limited assortment of looks. First he showed me a thinking expression, the eyes withdrawn like a pair of shrinking black beads, the nostrils flaring as he weighed the wisdom of swinging at me again.

“Did we not predict this?” he said, sitting down across from me as he dropped a meaty hand on my desktop. Under the hand was some kind of document, a newsletter or brochure. The part the hand didn’t cover showed me a frontal view of a mountain lion’s head done in blue ink, eyes slit, jaws unhinged, fangs bared and ready to chomp.

Don said he could remember talking about this very thing, back before the referendum passed. “This is exactly what we said would happen.”

“Only we thought it would happen sooner.”

“And further up in the hills. Not right here, for shit sake. But it just goes to show you. Something’s got to be done, Sayers.”

I opened my top desk drawer and slid the papers into it. “Let me guess. We have to repeal the lion law, let a bunch of rich guys start hunting the hell out of them.”

“Damn straight. These lions are the only wild animals in the state the department doesn’t manage. You know who’s in charge of them?”

“The Friends of the Mountain Lion wrote that law.”

“You know who those people are, Sayers?”
“Not biologists.”

“Who needs biologists when you got a few slick lobbyists down at the capitol and a bunch of money ponied up by movie stars and save the whales fanatics? I’m telling you Sayers, if it’s left up to those nuts we’ll have a lion in every backyard in the state before long. It won’t be safe to go outside.”

“You know what I wish?” I said. “I wish we could manage all these new people back to wherever the hell they’re coming from. Too many backyards—that’s the main problem.”

“Yeah, but the people aren’t going anywhere.”

“Let a few more of them get attacked. Their minds could change.”

He rolled his heavy shoulders, shrugging off my joke. He assured me he was just being practical, he had no special feelings for rich guys who get their thrills shooting mountain lions off of tree branches. As if I had to be told this. Don is a real outdoors-man, not the kind of poser you’d see riding in a jeep out to shoot a lion treed by some paid tracker’s hounds. He grew up right around here. In the valley and in the mountains that enclose it, nobody could give you a more complete catalogue of the wildlife that’s been sacrificed over the last thirty years to what developers call development. Whenever I felt sickened by what was happening around here, I’d think how much worse it must be for a native son like Don.

“If I were you I wouldn’t be so level-headed about it,” I told him.

“Yeah. Well.”

“Unless I had some ulterior motive,” I said, reacting to a faint flicker of mischief that played around his chin. In answer to my veiled query his nostrils flared a little. The beads of his eyes shrank again, receding.

I leaned forward and planted my elbows on the desk. “Since when is a fish biologist so interested in mountain lions, anyway?”

Thoughts and feelings passed across Don’s face like rapid weather. “Sayers,” he said after a little, “this isn’t just about mountain
lions. We’ve come to a crossroads in this state, and it’s time to decide who’s going to manage the fish and wildlife. A state agency staffed by experts, or a bunch of bird-brained agitators who know a lot about brainwashing voters and diddly squat about anything else.”

If you’d told me retirement would turn Don Mackey into a philosopher I’d have said you were nuts. When I mentioned this he reached up and rubbed a floppy ear-top between his finger and thumb—an old and oddly endearing habit.

I said, “You know, if they legalize hunting lions again they’ll be able to charge those trophy-hunters a nice chunk for the license. That chunk will go to the department, of course.”

He was purpler every second. “So...?”

“So if I was a disgruntled old fart fish biologist who’d been put out to pasture, that might interest me. Especially if my wife had me doing hard labor out in the backyard. I might be thinking, Shit, maybe if they get enough money off those licenses, they’ll open my lab up again.”

“Jesus,” Mackey said, “if I’d known you were going to cross examine me I’d’ve thought twice about stopping by.”

I leaned back and turned up my palms. “You’re right. One more question, then I’ll leave you alone.”

He nodded.

“I know you didn’t come all the way out here to see me.”

He slid that heavy hand across the desktop toward me, then lifted it to reveal the document I had glimpsed before. A newsletter. COUGAR ALERT! printed in bold blue across the top. On either side was the blue fang-filled cougar head.

“This attack will be the main thing in the next issue,” he said. “I’m just making sure we get the whole story.”

I whistled and wagged my head. “Not just a philosopher, but a reporter too.”

He winked at me. “I’ll save a place for you, old buddy. Just let me know when you’re ready to really serve the community.”

“What, and give up all my perks?” I pointed at my open door. A minute before I’d started hearing voices through it.
“Is that…?” Don snapped his fingers, searching for the name.
“Shirley,” I said. “From Public Safety.”
He shut his eyes and flared his nostrils wide. “Jesus, what a can she’s got. I still dream about it.”

We got up and crossed the hall to Emilio’s office. Shirley was standing across from my assistant’s desk talking to him. I paused in the doorway so we could admire her a little before she knew we were there. She had black curly hair and soft, quick-blushing cheeks. She was almost forty, but the round cheeks made her look younger. My eyes dawdled their way across Shirley and then hopped over to Emilio. He met my glance and I cocked my head ever so slightly, communicating my admiration to another male. Face it, men are going to do this kind of thing. The big change between now and the old days is that most of us have learned to be sneakier about it. Most of us.

Emilio answered my nod with a little half-nervous smile. Shirley turned to face me and said hello.
I asked her if she remembered Don.
“From the lab?” she said, eyeing him. “You do look familiar.”
Don said, “Yeah, so do you. I never forget a, uh, face.”
“That’s right, from the lab,” I said.
“You know,” Don told her, “the one they closed down two years ago, about the time they expanded your unit.”

The smile stayed on Shirley’s face, but its temperature dropped.
I told her she’d have to excuse Cro-Magnon, who didn’t get out of the cave that much anymore. Then I apologized for interrupting.
“That’s okay,” Shirley said. “Emilio just asked me what you’re supposed to do if you find yourself face to face with a mountain lion, and I was filling him in.”
I asked if she minded filling us in too.
“Not at all. This is what they pay me the big bucks for.” She shot a sharp smirk at Don and then smiled, looking suddenly official, highly polished. “Number one. Do not run away. Running
may stimulate a mountain lion’s instinct to chase. Number two. Don’t crouch or bend over. A person squatting or bending over looks like a four-legged prey animal. Three. Do everything you can to appear larger. Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you’re wearing one. Wave your arms and speak firmly in a loud voice.”

Sometimes when I look back over my life I think it would have gone much smoother if I’d timed my exits better. I’ve had a tendency to stick around longer than I should, and usually I’m staying to fix something that a person with any sense would have left alone. This was one of those times. When Shirley finished her little presentation I told her she wasn’t giving a thing away to Kim Stanley on channel thirteen.

Don nodded. “Yeah. I wouldn’t mind getting home every night and seeing a pretty gal like you. On TV, I mean.”

When he finished laughing, I said, “Whoa, careful there. You don’t behave yourself we might have to toss you on the dung-heap.”

“What for?” he said.

“He doesn’t realize he could get in trouble these days,” Shirley said, “talking like that to the wrong person.”

Don flicked his hands out to his sides. “Hey, that’s the idea, isn’t it.”

She was quiet a moment, looking him up and down. “Then again, at your age...”

“Believe me dear, at my age the idea’s trouble enough.”

Don’s laugh filled my ears as I moved my eyes from Emilio to Shirley, from his snicker to her broad, blushing grin. It looked like old hippo-head had self-deprecated both of us out of a tight corner when Shirley said, “Even so, you’d better watch it.”

But then her grin tightened into a kind of cold snarl and shame rose up and hit me like a strong gust.

As she passed through the door Don said in my ear, “Oh, I’ll watch it. You bet I will.”

I wanted to wheel and kick his prehistoric shins. And then have him kick mine.