The first real call came from a house on the east side of Olives, one of the older neighborhoods where most of the original parcels of land had been carved up and built on. But like Sadie’s place, on the other end of town, this house still sat alone on its several acres. I got a good feeling from the front porch as soon as I stepped onto it. It was pleasant but not quaint. The paint on the wicker furniture wasn’t too fresh; the pillows on the chairs and couch looked cozy and well used. The doorbell was an actual bell, a little cast iron number that Don reached up to pull.

The guy who came to the door was young—late teens, maybe twenty—and needed a haircut.

“Morning,” Don said.

The kid studied us for a minute, scratching at his thin beard.

“Department of Wildlife?”

“We represent Wildlife, yeah,” Don said. “Answering your call.”

“Not my call,” the kid said, and as if on cue a woman’s voice came to us from the back of the house. A slow voice, on the deep side.

“Cory, is that the Department of Wildlife? Let them in, will you babe?”

While we walked through the house’s front rooms I looked Cory over from behind. He needed a belt more than a haircut.

His mom was in the kitchen talking on the phone. The bathrobe or kimono she wore was blue and white, batik. In one hand she held a great bunch of her thick hair, keeping it off her ear and
out of the way of the receiver. Dark, pretty hair, more pepper in it than salt.

“Yes, I’ll tell them,” she said into the phone. “They’re standing right here. No, I don’t think you need to talk to them. You have work to do. Don’t worry, I’ll tell them. Listen, babe, can you hold on?”

She put her palm on the mouthpiece and smiled at us, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “Cor, take them down to the pasture and show them Theresa, would you. I’ll be off in a second.”

Cory led us through a sliding glass door out onto a big back deck that overlooked their sloped pasture. Beyond the pasture stood a dense wall of live oaks, and beyond those a landscape of dredged rock-hills stretched half a mile across flat floodplain, almost to the river. We followed Cory down two flights of wooden stairs, the goat-odor sharpening with every step. Just inside the gate he stopped and pointed to a lump of beige fur that lay a few feet away from an old metal washtub.

“There she blows,” he said, and passed us on his way back through the gate.

Don watched him climb the stairs. “Nice lad.”

He had explained to me on the way over that this was most likely a dog kill, by far the most common cause of livestock loss in this area. But as soon as we were standing over the goat he ruled dogs out. Except for the gory hole the lion had torn to get at the nutritious inner organs, the goat’s body didn’t look too bad. Its face was unmarked and the death wound, the place where the fangs had sunk in to sever the spinal cord, wasn’t visible until you took a close look.

“No sir,” Don said, pushing the hair away so I could see the puncture wounds, “a dog kill is a hell of a lot messier than this. Struggle makes the mess.” He showed me the claw marks where the lion had raked the goat’s shoulder so I could recognize them on future corpses. Then we puttered around the crime scene awhile, checking out prints, piecing together the sequence of events before we headed back up to the house.
At the foot of the stairs Don patted my shoulder. “Well Sayers, at long last.”

“What a relief.”

Through the sliding glass door I saw that the mother was off the phone and sitting at the table. Cory sat on the counter across the kitchen from her. His feet in their heavy hiking boots hung down like two buckets of cement.

We passed through the door and the mother, Susan, introduced herself. As she was handing me a cup of coffee she asked if we’d met anywhere before.

“Think of the Bee a couple weeks ago, front page,” Don said to Susan. There was more excitement in his voice than the occasion called for. The dead goat had him jazzed.

She took a long look at me. “The little mountain lion. You’re the one that saved it.”

Don slapped his knee. He was still wagging his head and giggling about my fame when the kid asked if I lived around there.

“No,” I said, “but my daughter does. We haven’t met, have we?”

He had seen me ride through Old Olives a few times.

Susan said to me, “You wouldn’t have actually met unless you went out to the picnic table in the middle of the park to bum a cigarette and play hacky sack.” The look she gave her son was more playful than chiding.

I liked her face and so I kept watching it, saw it go a little grave as the reason for our being here displaced the pleasure of teasing her son. “Sorry I was on the phone before,” she said. “My husband’s out of town on business, and he’s sick about this. He’s sure a mountain lion killed Theresa. When I called the Department of Wildlife this morning they said it was probably dogs.”

“A lot of times it is dogs,” Don said. “But not this time.”

She squinted. “You mean?”

“Yeah, that’s a lion kill.”

“Cool!” Cory said, coming off the counter with a heavy clomp of boots.
His mother scowled at him. “Oh, Cor.”
Cory said, “Come on, it serves him right.”
“Serves who right?” Don asked.
“My husband bought Theresa a year ago, to help keep the weeds down out back. Cory has never been that enthusiastic about having her.”
Don asked the kid what he had against goats.
Cory leaned back against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. “Goats are fine, in their place.”
“In their place?”
“I don’t have anything against wild mountain goats,” Cory said. “There’s pastoral cultures in some parts of the world that still depend on their goat herds for subsistence. That’s totally fine with me.”
Don’s face was beginning to darken. “So?”
“So the mountain lion is a native here. The goat’s not.”
“Cory’s into native species,” Susan explained.
Don didn’t say anything. A quick glance at that darkening face told me there was a fight going on behind it. One voice urged him to give this little pipsqueak a good chewing out while another reminded him of his semi-official position and counseled restraint. Susan took advantage of the lull to nudge the discussion back onto the main track.
“So it definitely was a mountain lion,” she said. “Where do we go from here?”
Don told her a couple of people from the department would have to come over and snoop around for a while, just to make sure he and I weren’t imagining that a lion killed her goat. “After that,” he said, “it’s up to you.”
“So we do have choices.”
“That’s right. There’s a depredation allowance in the law that gives you the right to have this one taken since it killed your goat. You can, but you don’t have to.”
Susan tilted her head and ran a hand back through her thick hair. “Taken away, you mean?”
“No, killed,” Cory said, and Susan’s eyes swung from Don to Cory, then back to Don.

“That’s correct,” Don said.

“There’s no way to remove it without killing it?”

Don told her that had been tried, without much success. “There have been a couple cases where a lion wandered into some neighborhood and treed, and they managed to hit it with a dart. Problem is, they take the thing up into the little bit of wilderness that’s left in this state, they let it go, and within a day or two it’s either been killed by the cat whose territory they let it out on, or it’s been chased onto the next piece of territory, where it either gets killed or driven off again because all the territory is spoken for. That’s why the cat was walking through the suburbs in the first place.”

“Because he has no territory?” Susan said, her eyebrows drawn together with sympathy and concern.

“That’s right, yeah. This cat that killed your goat, I guarantee it’s a young male, too old to stay with his mother anymore and too young and weak to take a piece of turf from some dominant male. There’s just not enough turf to go around. The voters have decided to protect mountain lions in this state. At the same time, people are crowding into the animal’s habitat.” Don pointed out back with his thumb. “This cat? He wouldn’t be hanging around so close to people if he didn’t have to. So let’s say you move him. Chances are he’s dead in a week. But what if he survives, what if he keeps bouncing around like a pinball until he reaches the suburbs again? He’s got to eat. So maybe he goes after another goat. Maybe a sheep or a dog. Maybe a little boy or girl. You don’t know.”

“I say let him kill all the goats and sheep he can,” Cory said.

“Why not?” Don said, sneering. “And all the joggers, too, eh?”

“Hey, sure. Make people think twice before they move here. Keep down the crowds.”
The smile appeared on my face before I could think to fight it back. In my office the day after the jogger died, I had made the same remark to Don. The smirk he slid me showed that he remembered too.

I could have sworn that Susan was also suppressing a smile when she told Cory to quit stirring the pot. Then she turned to Don. “Now, how soon can someone from the Department of Wildlife get here?”

“An hour or so,” Don said. “They’ll want to get right on this. If you want it taken, I mean.”

“We don’t,” Cory said, looking at his mother, who had turned to the sliding glass door and was gazing out. “Mom, tell him we don’t.”

For half a minute nobody said anything. Then Cory clomped over to Susan. “Mom, what are you waiting for? You don’t want to have the mountain lion killed.”

Susan spoke to the sliding glass door. “Personally, I would like for it to be taken away. But Mr. Mackey just explained that that’s not really an option.”

“Great,” Cory said, “so bring in the hounds. Let’s have us a big ole lion hunt,” he said in a broad hick accent.

Don’s color plunged toward deepest crimson. “In point of fact, hunting dogs wouldn’t be used in this situation. There are too many homes packed in here, too many roads.”

Cory threw his hands in the air. “So poison it, then, whatever. There’s a lot of ways to skin a cat.”

“Cory,” Susan said, turning back to the middle of the kitchen, “please.”

Cory stepped up and spoke right into her face. “You just said we had to call these guys to check things out. You never said anything about killing the mountain lion.”

She closed her eyes.

“Wait a minute,” Cory said, taking hold of her shoulders. “He told you to have it killed, didn’t he? That’s why he called back, the dick.”
She didn’t open her eyes or move.

“He told you to have it killed,” he said in a quiet, marveling voice. “Mister Dickhead lost his fucking goat, and he wants the culprit to pay.”

“Cory,” she said, “don’t call him that.”

“You know what makes me sick?” Cory said, his pitch and his volume climbing now. “What makes me sick is it’s his own fault for bringing the miserable goat here in the first place. Do you think he’d ever admit that? Of course he wouldn’t. He’s never wrong. He’s never guilty. But somebody has to be, don’t they?”

He let go of Susan’s shoulders and began to laugh. “Wait!” he said, then broke up laughing again. “What am I doing? I should be thankful, shouldn’t I? For once it’s not Cory, the lazy shit. For once it’s not Cory, the spoiled turd, who’s to blame for every single thing that goes wrong in this fucking house. Thank you, Mr. Mountain Lion! Thank you!”

Susan stood absolutely motionless, her eyes still closed, as her son wheeled and stormed out of the kitchen. After the front door slammed Don and I exchanged glances, shrugged our shoulders at the same time. Then I pulled the pad out of my breast pocket and scribbled down the number of the department. She already had the number, but it was all I could think to do.

“Here,” I said, stepping over to Susan. “Maybe you’d like to think things over a while. Give the department a call if and when you’re ready.” She took the paper from me and apologized for Cory.

When we reached the front door, she apologized again, thanked us for coming. At the bottom of the stairs I turned to look at her. I guess I was expecting embarrassment to show on her face, some kind of shame for the private things we had just witnessed. But as she stood at the top of the porch steps, looking off in the direction Cory had gone, her eyes were steady and dry. Their corners crinkled as she observed that some extra territory would be a big help.

Don was talkative for the first couple miles after we left the house, sharing with me a few of his personal views on how Cory
might be better managed. I listened patiently until his color lightened to a shade of red that I judged to be less than lethal. Then I asked him to pull into the next 7-11 we saw. I needed something pink to pour into my stomach. It had begun to boil again.