Hear Him Roar

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PART FOUR
ON THE BRIDGE

I smoked my last cigarette when I was twenty-five. Still, on cool mornings I enjoy the smell of a cigarette burning outdoors. The morning after Growl, Howl and Wine I was savoring some second-hand smoke as I passed one of the picnic tables out in the middle of Old Olives Park, when the kid doing the smoking said hey.

To me? Thinking that was unlikely, I walked on after a brief pause. But the kid said hey again, louder, so I stopped and looked at him. It took me a second to place Cory. The shaggy hair was familiar, also the big boots. The light finally went on for me when I remembered his mom saying he liked to hang around this park with his friends.

“Going to the bridge?” he said.
“That’s right. They’re about to start. You coming?”
He shook his head.
“Why not?”
“Rush to judgment. I don’t want any of that.”
“This is about the kid who disappeared, right?”
Cory dipped his chin—a shorthand nod. “They’re saying a mountain lion did it.”

“Know what kind of evidence they have?”
He smirked. “Go down and hear for yourself. They’re getting ready to tell the TV crews about it. That’s why I’m up here.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m sure they wouldn’t say it was a cougar if they didn’t have some reason.”
“They have all kinds of reasons.”
“Don’t you want to hear them?”
He flicked his butt away. “Their reasons aren’t the kind you talk about on TV.”

“Not unless somebody makes you,” I said.

“What, you think I can make them tell the truth?”

“Who knows, if you don’t speak up?”

“I speak with actions,” he said, glancing away.

“So I gathered.”

His eyes swung back to me. “How do you speak?”

“Me?”

He looked me over as if I’d just appeared. “I don’t remember you saying much when you were at my house. Your partner did most of the talking. You agree with everything he says?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

He tapped a new cigarette out of the pack. “How far would you go?”

I watched him light the cigarette, inhale, then blow two thick streams of smoke through his nostrils.

“They want to string up a mountain lion,” he said. “You going along with that?”

“I need to hear the facts.”

“What if it didn’t touch any child? What if they just want to kill a mountain lion?”

“That’s wrong,” I said, “it’s against the law. Like it was against the law to disable the trap the department set for the lion that killed your family’s goat.”

“What if the law’s wrong?”

“If the law’s wrong, you change it. There’s a process for that.”

“Who has time for a process? Not the killed mountain lion.”

“What then?” I said. “If a law’s wrong, break it—is that the solution?”

“Your buddies seem to think so.”

“I’m not as sure about that as you.”

He jerked his head in the direction of the bridge. “Go down there then, see what the plan is.”
“I think I will.”
As I turned to go he said, “What if I’m right?”
“About the rush to judgment? If you’re right about that, I’ll speak up.”

The ballsy kid shrugged. “Maybe they’ll listen to you.”

By the time I reached the open air theater I’d mastered the urge to go back and ask for a cigarette. I passed the theater, then the community clubhouse. When I came to the edge of the park I turned right onto Bridge Street. My stomach was starting to hurt.

Bridge Street makes a long gradual curve, so I didn’t see the bridge until I was within fifty yards of it. But the line of cars parked on both sides of the street started well before that. TV vans filled the spaces closest to the bridge. On the bridge itself, out above the middle of the river, a big crowd had gathered. Booms and tripods and cameras and lights loomed over and protruded from the human cluster. Thick cables of many colors ran along the bridge’s wooden planks, bringing juice from the trucks to the cluster and sending sounds and pictures back. When I reached the point where these cables disappeared amid various shoes, I saw that everyone’s attention was directed to the upriver side of the bridge, where three men stood head and shoulders above everyone else, propped on a platform I couldn’t see.

The one I recognized was Cliff Carter, the smooth talker from the Department of Wildlife. On one side of Carter stood a law enforcement guy in a green outfit and badge. On the other side was a guy in a blue suit and red tie.

The law enforcer, a thickset, neckless sheriff’s deputy, was reviewing the facts of the case in that stiff way cops are taught to speak. The individual in question was a young boy, he announced, eight years of age, who strayed from the Gold Rush housing development adjacent to the river parkway with a friend the previous afternoon. At some point in time the two young individuals were separated. One found his way back home, but the whereabouts of the other remain unknown at this particular point in time. The
authorities were alerted as to this situation yesterday evening and have been engaged in a concerted attempt to ascertain the missing individual’s whereabouts ever since.

Someone from the press asked if the child had been attacked by a mountain lion and the officer said at this point in time it would be premature to comment on that.

The reporter persisted. “If this wasn’t a mountain lion attack, why is the Department of Wildlife here?”

Here Cliff Carter stepped forward. “If you don’t mind, Deputy Davis, I’d like to remind the members of the press and the local families who have come out this morning that we lost a jogger to a mountain lion only two months ago, a few miles upriver from here.” That day, Carter explained, they made the mistake of assuming the attacker had been human, which ended up complicating their investigation. “We just want to have our people on hand as this unfolds,” Carter told them.

My, was Carter slick. Last time I’d seen him he had a ball cap on, but today he had his shiny black hair uncovered for the cameras to see. With that tan, chiseled face, that cleft chin, he was made for TV—the public’s ideal protector.

“But do you in fact suspect a mountain lion of killing the child?” a reporter wanted to know.

“We know that a mountain lion is in the area,” Carter said. “This animal has exhibited some very bold behavior.” He told the crowd about Susan and Cory’s goat. “That occurred pretty nearby. Close enough to have us concerned.”

A murmur went through the outer rings of the crowd. A tall, red-haired man a few bodies in from me yelled out that he and his family lived in Gold Rush, and it was ludicrous he should have to worry about cougars attacking his kids. He wanted to know why the department let this mountain lion thing get so out of hand.

“That’s a very, very good question,” Carter said. “It’s important for everyone to know that the Department of Wildlife is prevented by law from effectively managing the mountain lion population in this state. This law keeps our hands tied until after
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something happens. Unfortunately sir, the people who should be answering your question are the leaders of the Friends of the Mountain Lion. They wrote the legislation I’m talking about and lobbied intensively to make sure it passed as a ballot initiative.” He made a visor of one hand. “Unfortunately, I don’t see anybody from the Friends of the Mountain Lion among us today.”

Then, smooth as a running back taking a handoff, the guy in the blue suit stepped forward to say that the best thing right now was to let Mr. Carter and Sheriff Davis go ahead and do whatever they could within the framework of existing law. What really had to be addressed, he told this lion-fearing mob, was the procedure for nullifying a law that was about to be proven unsafe and destructive to Californians for a second time in just a couple of months. “We need to talk about keeping our kids safe,” he told the crowd. “We need to talk about repealing a law that protects mountain lions but leaves mothers and children vulnerable to attack.”

This was Dick Beech, I learned as soon as the questions started coming from the reporters. A state representative from one of the hill counties where they had voted against the hunting ban in the first place. He was here to inform these flatlanders that the problem was not just a hillbilly problem now, it wasn’t just sheep-farmers who had to worry about mountain lions, but everyone. Just as everyone, by banding together, exercising their legislative rights, could eliminate this menace once and for all.

That was the basic message. After he repeated it a couple of times I stopped listening and busied myself with noticing all the craft they’d exercised in staging this event. Here we were on the old iron bridge built by Olives’ original settlers. A landmark familiar to anyone who’d ever ridden or jogged the bike trail or rafted the river itself. People knew the bridge—it was part of their world, a symbol of what they’d soon be giving up to a bunch of bloodthirsty cougars. Or maybe the bridge signaled transition, a link between here and there. And these three musketeers up on the platform? They were our link, our connection to a predator-free future. Or so they would have us believe.
I, for one, didn’t believe it, and I didn’t like the way they were pulling people’s strings here, using this family’s misfortune to sell a political plan. My emotions were running hot, stoked by last night’s excitements and further fueled now by the pains that pierced my gut.

I turned, ready to stomp away from this scene as Cory had before me, but Don Mackey blocked my path.

“Where do you think you’re going, my friend?”
“I need something to eat,” I grumbled.
“Well come on then, let’s get something quick. We got a lion to catch.”