

THE RAT SAVIOR: AN EXCERPT FROM *WHEN THE KILLING'S DONE*

*When the Killing's Done: A Novel will be published by Viking in February 2011.*

Morning breaks clear over the water, the fog confined to a white ruff at the shoulders of the islands, the sea calm, the winds light, though the weather service is warning of another storm system moving in from the north sometime later in the day. Which might or might not affect them, depending on how long this is going to take. Or if anyone tries to stop them, which is always a possibility. Anise is asleep in the bow berth, the rhythm of her breathing punctuated by a light rasping gargle deep in the throat—a snore that periodically rises up over the throb of the engine and settles back down again. Wilson, the man who can nod off anywhere, anytime, is stretched out facedown on the couch, a blanket pulled up over his head. There's fresh coffee, for when they want it, and Anise-made sandwiches in the reefer. On the table, the three black plastic bags and the three backpacks that will receive and transport them. Dave hasn't got the radio on, preferring the silence. He sips coffee, watches the sea. The boat holds steady, barely a ripple on the surface.

53

Wilson's friend—her name is Alicia Penner and she makes the trip from Goleta all the way down the coast to Ventura five days a week to work as a secretary in the offices of the National Park Service on Harbor Drive in the marina, where the sun sits in the windows and the NPS drones shuffle papers all day and think about what to kill next—has, in her humble role as a friend of the animals, pinpointed the day of the drop for them. It's not general knowledge. For all their lectures and Q&A sessions, these people aren't really interested in hearing what the public has to say—and they certainly don't want any interference, not at the museum, not in the parking lot, and especially not at the kill site, all the way out there across the belly of the gray lapping waves.

This is the day before Thanksgiving, a day when everybody's mind is on turkey and chestnut stuffing and football and champagne, and the islands, if they register at all, are nothing more than a distant blur in the mist. The Park

Service plan is to hit East Anacapa first, while people are standing in line at Von's and Ralph's and Lazy Acres Market, ditching work to clink glasses at the downtown bars, nipping out to the airport to pick up Grandma and Aunt Leona, basting turkeys, geese, ducks, and then, two weeks later, when the very same people are busy Christmas shopping and planning their office parties, they'll bombard the middle and western islets. Secrecy. Privacy. Out of sight, out of mind. But what the pencil-necks in their swivel chairs haven't taken into account is that some people don't eat turkeys or geese or ducks, don't eat meat of any kind, because meat is murder and every living thing has an animating spirit and the same right to life as the humans who take it from them, butcher them, feed them into their gaping greedy jaws and toss the bones into the trash as if the thing that bore them never existed at all. And those people tend to pay attention. Real close attention.

54

When the island begins to climb up out of the haze and spread itself across the horizon to the south, fifteen minutes out and counting, he cuts the engine and ducks down into the cabin to nudge Anise awake. She's a heavy sleeper, a sprawler, as comatose as if she's been conked with a ball-peen hammer, and he bends to her gently, brushes the hair away from her face and leans in to kiss the corner of her mouth. Her lips are slightly parted, her lids closed on a faint stripe of eyeliner. In that fraction of a moment he's involved in the heat of her, a rising radiant aura of flesh and fluids, the faint lingering scent of her perfume and the jojoba shampoo she uses, her breath sweet and moist and lush with sleep. "Hey," he whispers, "hey, Ankhesenamun, wake up. Imhotep's here."

It takes her a moment, coming back from very far off, and then her eyes ease open without a hint of surprise, as if she knew he was there all along. Her lips are warm, puffy, lipstickless. She's wearing an oversized T-shirt, pale blue to match her eyes, with her own name done up in freehand across the front and the dates and venues—Lompoc, Santa Maria, Nipomo, Buellton, Santa Ynez—of her last modest self-financed tour in support of her last modest self-financed CD scrolling down the back. "I want my mummy," she says, reaching out for him, and this is a routine that goes back to their first date, a trip to Paseo Nuevo to see the remake of the old Boris Karloff flick.

He holds the embrace just long enough, a morning hug, that's all, and then pulls away from her and straightens up. He can feel the caffeine working in him, the boat rocking like a cradle, sea air leaching in from above. What he's remembering is the first time he ever laid eyes on her, a Sunday afternoon

in February or maybe it was March and she was playing at the Cold Spring Tavern high up in the San Marcos pass, opening for a grind-it-out blues band. She mounted the little five-foot-square stage with her head down, the guitar slung under one arm. He was at the bar with one of his buddies—Wilson maybe, or maybe not. Folk wasn't really his thing, but she was the whole package, a big wide-faced beauty with skin the sun had never touched and hair the color of honey hardened in the jar that reached all the way down to her knees, and—this really got him, as if all the rest weren't enough—bare feet. Those feet fascinated him, perfect, sleek, unadorned, the flexing toes and rising arch, the beat invested in the flesh. Her feet grabbed the stage and let it go, her lids fluttered shut and her head rolled back till her tongue found the words to ride out over the rhythm. She was like some kind of hippie princess resurrected from another time, out of sync, wrong, definitely wrong, but big-shouldered and confident and shining all the same. He began to listen, to tune out Wilson or whoever it was, and hear what she was projecting, a handful of covers and a skein of originals that went beyond cheating hearts and poisoned love to speak to the issues, to the way the sons of bitches were paving over the world, factory-farming animals, inserting their toxic genes into everything we drank and ate till they were inescapable. The songs weren't half-bad, he was thinking, and when she walked off the stage and disappeared out back he found himself having another cocktail and then another, and he might have forgotten all about her in the rush of conversation and the fumes of his Absolut rocks, but then the members of the blues band took the stage and halfway through the first set she appeared there in the middle of them as if she were a revenant made flesh and let her voice go on "Stormy Monday" till it made something ache high up inside him.

55

"Later," he tells her now, colder than any mummy, and then softens it. "Tonight," he says, "when we get back. And I'll take you to dinner. To celebrate. But right now we've got some business to do, remember?"

Stretching, her bare legs canted away from the sleeping bag and that warm, fleshy odor rising to him: "We almost there?"

He nods, already in motion. "Yeah," he says. "And coffee's in the galley, hot, fresh, and ready. I'm going to wake Wilson, okay?"

Breakfast consists of bagels, yogurt, and a fruit medley Anise put together the night before. They eat at the helm, she perched beside him on the seat, her bare legs tucked under her, spooning up yogurt while he pushes the throttle forward and the boat skips over the waves. Wilson is down below,

rattling around, singing snatches of something unrecognizable in a clear tuneless voice. The sun hovers and fades. Birds skew away from them and fall back in their wake. Full throttle, a bit of chop now, the bagels rubbery, too moist, the coffee setting fire to his stomach, each sliver of fruit dropping down his throat like a stone thrown from a cliff—is he going to be sick, is that it?—and then the island’s right there in front of them, big as a continent.

The anchorage is on the north shore, near the eastern tip of the island, and as they motor into the mouth of the cove—rock right to the water, the cliffs wrapped around so tightly it’s like heading into a cave with the top lifted off—they can see the Park Service boat moored to one of the buoys there, buoys reserved for the NPS and the Coast Guard, while the dock beyond them is for the exclusive use of the concessionaire that brings day-trippers out to the island. Everybody else has to drop anchor farther out and take a dinghy into shore. All right. Fine. He has no argument with that—or maybe he does, because these sons of bitches act as if the place is their own private reserve when in fact it’s a public resource, but that’s moot now. What matters—what heartens him as he drops anchor and scans the cove—is that nobody seems to be around. No recreational boaters, no Park Service types, no PhDs or bird-watchers. Just the mute black cliffs and a scurf of parched brown vegetation. And the dock, with its iron steps and railings winding up onto the plateau above.

56

Anise will stay with the boat; that’s what he’s decided. She’s not going to be happy about it, but the breeze is picking up and, even after he puts out the second anchor, he realizes somebody’s going to have to stay aboard in case of emergency—the anchorage isn’t as protected as he’d like, and the last thing he wants is to come back to a boat blown onto the rocks. And he needs Wilson with him to spread the stuff, because Wilson has the mindset and stamina to get the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible—before anybody shows up to ask what they’re doing, that is—while Anise, for all her commitment to the cause, tends to dawdle, making a fuss over this plant or that or stopping to admire the view or a butterfly or the way a hawk soars and dips over the cliffs on wings of fire, already composing the song in her head. Besides, she’s the most recognizable, especially with that hair and the long smooth white run of her legs no man could ignore, unless he’s blind, and there aren’t all that many blind park rangers, at least as far as he knows. All this comes to him as he stands on deck, scanning the shore with his

Leicas. Off in the distance, he can hear the barking of seals. The sea begins to slap at the hull. If it was flat-calm, dead-calm, it would be different.

Inside, in the cabin, Anise and Wilson are busy twisting open plastic bottles and upending them in the depths of the backpacks, along with a judicious measure of cat food, out of the twenty-five-pound bag, the tabs and kibble intermingled like chicken feed, not that he's ever seen chicken feed, but it's the principle, the scattering principle, he's interested in. Reach in and fling—that's what he's after. Vitamin K happens to be the antidote to brodifacoum and other anticoagulant baits, and the idea is that if the rats consume the poison pellets, well, then they'll eat the vitamins too—they'll want them, need them—and, once ingested, the vitamins will go to work neutralizing the blood-thinning properties of the bait. That's the hope, at any rate, because he's seen what the poison does and it's as cruel as anything he can conceive of—heartless, sickening—and people think nothing of it, not on the islands or in their own backyards.

He's never caught any of them at it, but his neighbors must sow d-Con like grass seed, judging from all the sick and dying animals he's found along the roads, birds especially. Jays, crows, sparrows, even a hawk. Any number of times, walking down to the post office or the beach or to have a drink in one of the bars along Coast Village Road, he's come across rats huddled on the side of the pavement, their eyes red, a bright blooming spot of blood in each nostril, quaking, suffering, unaware of him or anything else, and what of the raccoon or opossum—or dog—that comes along and scavenges the dying animal or even its corpse? They call that secondary poisoning, and he doubts if that's very pretty either.

“Okay,” he says, bracing himself against the table as the boat rocks on the swell, “I don't see any helicopters, or not yet, anyway—when they do the drop they're going to close off the island, and if we don't hustle out there, who knows how long before some Park Service honcho comes along and tells us we can't land at all.” He hefts one of the backpacks experimentally. “Oh, and we're going to need to fit everything in just two of the packs.” He glances at Anise, then drops his eyes. “The wind's up, baby. You're going to have to stay aboard. Like we discussed.”

“Uh, uh. No way.”

“Sorry.”

“Shit,” she explodes, jerking her pack across the table as if it's come to sudden vicious life before snatching it up and slamming it to the floor. “I

don't want to be cooped up in here while you're out there, I don't know, *doing* things. I want to do my part. Why you think I even came?"

This is the kind of thing that goes right by him, because there aren't going to be any arguments, not here, not today, and he doesn't bother to answer. He props his own pack between table and bench, folding back the flap to expose the interior, which, he sees, is a little better than half-full. Without looking up, he bends wordlessly to retrieve her pack and invert it over his. There's a dry rattle as the tablets tick against the nylon interior, Wilson gliding forward to offer up his own pack so as to balance out the load. When they're done, when they've shrugged into the packs and adjusted their identical black baseball caps—Anise's idea, as are the black jeans and hoodies, a way of confusing their identities in the event anyone should spot them on the trail—he digs out a tube of sunblock and extends it to her. "It's not fair," she mutters, squirting a dab of the stuff in one palm and leaning forward to work it into his face and neck in a firm circular motion, her hands cold, fingers wooden, making her displeasure known.

58

What can he say? That he's sorry, that he'll make it up to her, that someone has to be in charge? That life is imperfect? That she's not in kindergarten anymore and neither is he? He gets to his feet while she's still applying the stuff, impatient, nervous now, in danger of losing it, and all he can say is, "If the boat breaks anchor, you just start the engine and keep her away from the rocks till we get back. All right? You got it?"

Then they're in the dinghy, the waves jarring them like incoming rounds even though they're in the lee of the boat, and Anise is handing down the backpacks while he yanks at the starter cord on the little twenty-horsepower Merc, thinking *Please god do not let them get wet. Not now. Not after all this.* He can picture the thing flipping, the vividest image, the shock of the water, the crippling waves, he and Wilson clawing and blowing while the swamped boat slews away from them, a thousand bucks worth of Vitamin K2 spread across the bottom of the bay and every rat on the island bleeding out its mouth and ears and anus. The wind tastes like failure, like defeat and humiliation. *It's over,* he's thinking, *over before we start.* But Wilson is sure-handed, Anise adept, and the engine catches on the second try. He shifts into gear as the dinghy drifts free on a whiff of exhaust, twists the accelerator and noses the boat toward shore.

Because of the cliffs, the only place to land is at the dock, where they'll be plainly visible, but the dock is deserted and the sky closing in, and he won-

ders if the Park Service will risk flying their helicopters in weather like this. Maybe not. Maybe he and Wilson can get out in advance of the poisoners, give the rats a head start. Save them. Rescue them. Champion them. Nobody else is going to do it, that's for sure, nobody but him and Wilson and Anise, FPA, For the Protection of Animals. All animals, big and small. No exceptions. The wind's in his face, flapping the hood of the sweatshirt round his throat, the dock coming up fast—action, he's taking action while all the rest of them just sit around and whine—and he can feel the giddiness rising in him, the surge of power and triumph that rides up out of nowhere to replace the bafflement and rage and depression Dr. Reiser and his pharmaceuticals can't begin to touch. This is who he is. *This*.

There are something like a hundred and fifty steps up the cliff and onto the plateau above, and his hours on the Stairmaster hold him in good stead here, he and Wilson climbing stride for stride and flinging out handfuls of kibble and rat vitamins as they go, taking pains to hit even the most inaccessible spots, and so what if the tabs tend to dribble down the rock faces? No place is off-limits to a rat. When they get to the top—humped and treeless, nothing in sight but the lighthouse and a couple of whitewashed outbuildings, one of which features a plaque that says *Ranger Residence*—they decide to split up, Wilson taking the loop trail to the right and he to the left. “Okay,” he says, the wind beating at him and the blood surging through him till he feels as if he could take right off and hover overhead with the gulls, “remember to hit the cliffs all along the way, not just the trail—”

59

Wilson is watching him from beneath the pulled-down brim of his cap, looking as if he's just heard a good joke. Or told one. “Yeah, you already said that. About six hundred times.”

“And we'll meet in the middle”—the trail was an easy hike, mainly flat, two miles or less—“and cut across on a diagonal, just to make sure we cover as much territory as we can.”

Wilson holds his grin, brings one fist up for a knuckle-to-knuckle rap of solidarity, and then they're going their separate ways. The sun is in retreat now, the clouds twined across the horizon to the north like weathered rope, the wind coming in gusts strong enough to rake the pellets out of his hand, and before long he's tossing the stuff as high as he can and letting the wind do the work. It's exhilarating. Like being a kid at play. The vitamin tabs are a pale yellow, the kibble rust-colored, blood-colored, and he doesn't want to know what it's composed of, doesn't want to think of offal, bone, the leavings

of the slaughterhouse floor—it's enough to watch the stuff fly from his hand to loop and twist away from him like confetti.

Up the path, head down against the wind. And what if it rains? Will they postpone the drop? Will the vitamins dissolve, the kibble rot, stink, fester? He doesn't know enough about the properties of either compound to make that determination—besides which, it's too late to go back now. And even if the mix does break down, the most likely scenario has the rats eating it anyway—they're rats, after all, born to scrounge and hoard and eat till their stomachs swell like balloons—and it'll stay with them, fat-soluble, buried deep in their tissues. Who knows, maybe they'll find it so satisfying they'll ignore the cascade of blue pellets the Park Service plans to unleash on them. That's what he's thinking as he makes his way along the ridge, detouring when necessary to heave the mixture right out to the edge of the cliffs, lost in the rhythm of it—clutch, lift, release—and he begins to feel better, begins to think everything will work out after all.

60 He's in the moment, breathing deep, working his legs, the scent of coastal sage in his nostrils, birds hovering, lizards licking along ahead of him. Before long, he finds he's actually enjoying himself, twenty million people strung along the coast across from him and the island as deserted as it was when it rose up out of the sea. Except for Wilson, of course. And whatever Park Service types came out on that boat. And—lest he forget—the resident ranger, who's no doubt sitting on his ass in his little white house with the view to die for, reading crime novels, boiling spaghetti, blinding himself with gin.

He's off the path now—clutch, lift, release—thinking of the almost unimaginable degree of evil it must take to be a scientist in some big chemical company lab, Monsanto, Dow, Amvac, devoting all your talent and energy, your whole life, to coming up with a compound as deadly as brodifacoum and finding just the right mix of ingredients to make it irresistible, a kind of rat candy, rat cocaine, when his feet get tangled in the brush and the air goes suddenly still. It happens so fast he can't get a grasp on it, the cracked and veined earth vanishing beneath the thrust of his elbows as he pitches forward, dust in his eyes and the stones sifting away from him, flying stones, stones raking down the length of the chasm that opens up before him like a movie gone to wide-screen. *Warning: The cliffs are unstable. Stay on the path.* And then what's beneath him, beneath his torso and flailing legs, is going too, dropping away, and he with it. There's a brief moment of weightlessness and

the panic that seizes him with an electric jolt, and then the blow he catches from the ledge ten feet down.

He lands on his right side, on his rib cage, the air punched out of him and the backpack wrenched askew. At first he knows nothing, and then what does he know? That he has fallen from the cliff, the unstable cliff, the friable, loosely-compacted, and stony cliff, and that he has not plummeted—that's the word that comes to him, a word he wouldn't use in any other context—to his death. On the rocks below. Where the sea, riding in on the swell of the storm, thrashes and foams and pulverizes. For a long moment, he's unable to move. And then, like a cat waking from sleep, he flexes each of his muscles in turn, reacquainting himself with the mode of their functioning, thinking *Anise isn't going to believe this*, thinking *What if I have to be rescued? What if the helicopter, the Park Service helicopter, the poisoners' helicopter—?*

The ledge, this projection of volcanic rock bristling with the spikes of xerophytic plants that has broken his fall—saved him—is one of many, a series of jagged battlements projecting from the cliffs as if to impede an invasion. He sees this, can trace the pattern that is no pattern at all up and down the rock face in both directions, as he very gingerly shifts his weight. It takes him a moment, forty-two years old and with high blood pressure and a knifing pain in his right side, before he's able to work his feet beneath him and rise, inch by staggered inch, hugging the rock. When he's fully erect and can see above him to the place where the ground gave way, he becomes aware of the shag of plants to the near side of him, *Dudleya* mostly, succulents that would snap in two, pull right out, send him *plummeting*, but something with a woody stem too, *Ceanothus* or scrub oak maybe, right there, just inside the limit of his reach. He takes hold of it. Tries it. And then, pressing himself so close to the rock that he will later find pebbles, sand, bits of leaf and twig worked under his belt and into the seams of his underwear, he lifts himself, snatching at the next handhold while the toes of his hiking boots dig for traction. Twenty seconds later he's on top, his legs churning at the loose dirt, the pack binding, his blood howling in his ears, and then he's safe, scrambling fifty feet into the brush before he collapses.

The next thing he remembers is looking at his watch. And this is the astonishing thing—only five minutes have elapsed. Five minutes. Not an hour, just five minutes, three hundred seconds, from what seemed certain death to resurrection. He is sweating, though the wind is cold, the T-shirt beneath the hoodie wet through. There's a deep blue bruise on the back

of his right hand. His ribs ache. But he gets to his feet, digs out his plastic water bottle for a long hissing squeeze of the filtered water from the reverse-osmosis tank he installed in the kitchen at home, *acqua vita*, then tucks it away and starts back on up the trail, mechanically scattering pellets. The decision has already been made: he will tell no one, not Anise or Wilson or Dr. Reiser, about what has just happened. Or almost happened. Why should he? He feels like enough of an idiot as it is, and as he settles back into his rhythm—clutch, lift, release—he can't help wondering how much more an idiot he would have felt if he'd had to be rescued. Or worse: a posthumous idiot, splayed on the rocks with a crushed skull and his hips reverted, forever a totem of the Park Service, just like the pygmy mammoth. *Remember that clown? What was his name? The one that splattered himself all over the rocks trying to spread Vitamin K?*

62

Despite the sweatshirt, he's begun to shiver by the time he spots Wilson coming along the trail toward him. The sky is uniformly dark now, the wind stronger, colder, the brush whipping, bits of chaff and seed beating past him on gusts that seem to come from every direction at once. He keeps pitching handfuls of the vitamin mix into the air, though he's beginning to understand that there will be no drop today, no helicopters hovering overhead, no rats bloodied, no authorities to dodge or confront. He's thinking he should have paid more attention to the weather report, should have been more flexible—but then he's the kind of person who makes a plan and sticks to it, which is why he's been so successful in business, never crap out, never say die, never, above all, admit you're wrong. Wilson, loping along, his right arm shooting out rhythmically to toss one handful after another of the mix over his shoulder, gives him a grin as he closes on him. "How's it?" he calls when they're still twenty feet apart. "You got any stuff left? Because I'm just about out."

They stand there together a moment, backs to the wind, and Wilson digs a pack of cigarettes out of his inside pocket. "Freakin' cold, eh?" Wilson says. "They say the weather's changeable out here, but this is"—he tucks a cigarette into the corner of his mouth, cups a hand and puts the lighter to it—"this is brutal. You know it was going to be like this? I mean, could you even guess?"

He's not complaining, just commiserating in the way of a comrade-at-arms. "Yeah, colder than shit," is all Dave can manage in response, though he appreciates the sentiment. The shock of the fall is fading, and no, he's not

going to mention it, not now, not ever. It's like when he used to play football in high school—somebody blindsides you, you just get up and walk it off. The coach's face comes to him then, a joyless ego-gluttled overworked sinkhole of a face above a gray sweatshirt and a shining silver whistle on a red lanyard. *Walk it off*. That's what the coach would say, even if you'd separated your shoulder or dislocated your knee.

Wilson looks to the sky from beneath the pulled-down brim of the baseball cap. "I don't know, man—feels like rain to me."

"Yeah. Me too. But at least it's going to keep the bastards out of the sky. At least for today."

"I was wondering," Wilson says, kicking the toe of one boot into the dirt at his feet, the smoke of the cigarette torn from his fingers, his eyes squinted against the blow, "—if, you know, it does rain, like what is that going to do to this stuff? What if it really rains? I mean, like buckets, like the monsoon, because it's that time of year, you know. Are we wasting our time here? Is this all just going to wash away?"

If it is, he's not about to admit it. "Nah, I don't think so. And the fact that they're obviously not going to do the drop is okay too. It gives the animals a chance to store up, and even if the stuff gets wet, they're not going to care. You don't think a rat's that particular, do you?"

Wilson just shrugs. He's looking out across the water to where the horizon dissolves in a cauldron of cloud. "Shit, I don't know—that's your department. You're in charge, you tell me." A drag on the cigarette, the butt end glowing. "You're the one that wanted to come out here, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, well here we are, so let's stop gassing like a pair of old grannies in their rocking chairs and get this over with so I can sit by that heater you got and crack the champagne. Long live the rats, right?"

It takes another half hour to cover the plateau, he and Wilson branching out at a forty-five-degree angle, the wind, if anything, getting worse. When he's done, when the backpack is empty and his fingers numb and his ribs throbbing as if he's being kicked with each step he takes, he makes his way back to the trailhead to find Wilson there waiting for him, hunkered down on the steps with a paperback and another smoke. "We out of here?" Wilson asks, glancing up at him. "Yeah," he says, and then they're both bouncing down the steps, the cove expanding beneath them to reveal the Park Service boat still tied up to the buoy, and the *Paladin*—not that he was worried—still

at anchor, nose to the wind and the waves streaming round it like creases on a sheet.

It isn't till they get halfway down to the landing dock that they spot the figure there, a man in a teal shirt with his back to them, busy going up and down the ladder to secure his gear in a white Zodiac inflatable tied up next to the dinghy. Since there's only one other boat in the cove and only somebody escaped from the asylum would take that thing across the channel in weather like this, he has to conclude that the man is attached to the Park Service boat. "Don't look now," Wilson says, but he's already shushing him. "No worries," he says, striding across the dock as if the man on the ladder doesn't exist.

Up close—and the guy turns around on them now, as if he can sense their presence, or, more likely, feel the reverberations of their tread radiating along the boards of the dock—he's startled by the certainty that he's seen him somewhere before. The guy hoists himself up onto the dock, no smile, and he's tall, six-three or -four, giving them an expectant look, as if he's been waiting there for them.

64 If it was up to him he'd just brush right by without a word, not *What's happening* or *Looks like rain* or *Fuck you*, but Wilson takes it upon himself to be their ambassador of good will. "Nice day," Wilson says, rolling his shoulders side to side and showing off his grin, all lips, no teeth, as if that much pure white enamel would blind anybody with its radiant power.

Still no reaction from the man in the teal shirt. Who just stands there, arms folded, as if he's waiting for something, still waiting. His shoulders are narrow, his back slightly stooped. He looks to be in his mid-thirties, his face unlined and with something of the college frat-boy in it, the tight cartoon slash of a mouth sketched in under the exaggerated nose that cants ever so slightly to the left, as if it's been reshaped. Green eyes. Mud-colored hair, whipping round his head with the wind. And one more thing: a plastic nameplate, like cops wear, on the breast of his teal shirt. *Sickafoose*, it says.

So there's the wind, the dinghy jerking back on its painter, waves slapping at the pilings of the landing dock, the smell of rain on the air, the *Paladin* sitting right offshore and this jerk standing in their way. "The island's closed to the public," he says finally. "Will be closed for the next three weeks. Maybe you didn't see the sign?"

"No," he hears himself say, and he's not going to get worked up here, he's not. "No, we didn't see any sign."

Sickafoose measures out one of his long big-knuckled fingers and directs their attention to a white enameled sign the size of a regulation backboard, the squared-off admonitory letters stamped there in take-no-prisoners red, and how had he missed it? Not that it would have mattered. This is public land, reserved for the public, owned by the public.

“So what are you,” Dave says, “some kind of cop?”

“I’m a biologist.”

“Congratulations.”

Sickafoose ignores him. He’s got something in his hand, in the palm of his hand, which opens in a kind of slow phalangeal striptease on a spatter of rust-red cat kibble and pale yellow vitamin tabs, even as Wilson tugs at the brim of his cap and says, “Well, we got to be going, see you later, man,” and starts for the ladder.

“One minute,” Sickafoose says. The hand thrusts forward. “You know what these are?”

He can feel it now, the quickening pulse of that rage the drugs can only snatch at, and it’s all he can do to stop himself from spitting at the guy’s feet. “Uh, uh,” he says, the voice threshed in his throat. “Never saw them before.”

A beat. Wilson has his hands on the ladder, ready to kick down into the boat, in retreat, and that’s what he should do too—just get out of here and forget it. “You know it’s against the law to feed the wildlife in a national park?” Sickafoose says. “If that’s what you were doing. This is food, right?”

Another beat. Longer. Much longer. He’s thinking of the rat he saw along the road one sorrowful morning, huddled there in the tight binding robe of its agony, a perfect being, perfectly made, every detail of it alive in his memory, the pale exquisitely made fingers and toes, whiskers brushed back as if they’d been groomed, the suppleness of the nose, the dark bloodied holes of the nostrils and the pits of the suffering eyes, all of it senseless and wrong, wrong, wrong. All he says is this: “You going to step aside or what?”

Then they’re in the dinghy. Then the boat. Then the rain comes, washing across the surface in a series of sweeps that bring the waves to a boil, and forget the champagne, forget the whole thing, because the engine selects this moment, out of all the myriad others since he’s owned, maintained, and piloted the *Paladin* up and down the coast and out to the islands and back in every sort of weather and the most violent of seas, to fail.