



Welcome to the Jungle

Tuesday, September 3

BLAKE'S WATCH ALARM WENT OFF at five in the morning, wrenching him from a dream where he'd been wandering endlessly through the halls of some luxury hotel, searching for a room he couldn't locate. After burying the remains of his campfire he set out on the two-mile trek to the overlook, an oval patch of asphalt located fifty yards from the county road on a promontory high above the lake's surface. Blake got there a little before six, as the sun's first rays were reaching the lake's brown and orange rim. With his pack in his arms, he nestled into a crevice at the far end of the circle, where he had an unobstructed view of the overlook and the road leading up to it.

Fifteen minutes passed, then thirty. Fighting the urge to sleep, Blake opened his canteen and splashed some water on his face. At 6:50, the purr of an engine sounded in the distance. Holding his breath, he watched as a compact car pulled into the rest area and stopped. A young couple sat up front. In the seat behind them, a baby lay sleeping in a rear-facing child carrier. Blake studied the car, debating whether to approach them. Frank had stressed that his contact would arrive at seven o'clock sharp, which wasn't for another ten minutes. They must have shown up early, he decided, and now they were stalling for time.

After a minute or two, the couple got out and spread a map over

the car hood. They appeared to be arguing over directions: the man jabbed at the map with his finger and the woman shook her head stubbornly. Striding away from the vehicle, the man stood gazing moodily at the lake while the woman went to check on the sleeping infant. *Any second now, he'll take out a camera*, Blake told himself, getting ready to emerge from his hiding place.

Instead, the man spun on his heel abruptly and walked quickly back to the car. After saying something that Blake couldn't make out, he climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. The woman hurriedly tucked a blanket around the baby, then walked around to the passenger side and got in. The car drove swiftly out of the rest area, and all was quiet again.

Crouched in his rocky perch, Blake cursed through clenched teeth. Obviously, these were the people he was supposed to meet. Who else would visit this remote spot at the crack of dawn? Somehow he'd gotten his signals crossed.

You blew it! he thought, a wave of despair engulfing him. There was nothing left but to wait for Frank. Thanks to his indecision, his golden opportunity had slipped through his fingers.

Then, in the midst of his self-recriminations, Blake heard it: The hum of another motor in the distance. He ducked down in the rocks, praying for a second chance. A minute later, a pink stretch limousine with mirrored windows cruised slowly into the rest area and eased to a stop. The doors flew open and three long-haired men climbed out clutching beer bottles. With sinking heart, Blake realized it had to be another false alarm. The men were dressed like something out of an L.A. rock magazine from the 1980s, in skin-tight black leather pants and sleeveless body shirts. The first man out of the car had heavily muscled shoulders and a sullen, brooding air. With his opaque sunglasses and black top hat perched high on a mane of curly dark hair, he looked oddly familiar to Blake. The second man wore a billed newsboy cap and had a cigarette dangling from his lips. The third was hatless with mascara-laden eyelashes and a huge shock of almost translucent blond hair that cascaded halfway down his back.

As Blake watched from his lookout, a door on the far side of the limo opened and a fourth man in a leather vest stepped regally onto

the asphalt. His bare arms were covered with tattoos and a red handkerchief was knotted around his blonde, shoulder-length hair. Ignoring his companions, he stood gazing around through aviator-style sunglasses, an enigmatic smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“A truly awesome view,” said the man in the top hat loudly, staring at the lake. “I think I’m turning into a nature lover in my old age.”

“Save it for your shrink,” snarled the man in the cap.

“James—oh, *James!*” shouted Top Hat. “Could you find it in your cold, cold heart to bring us the fucking *cameras?*”

The driver’s door opened and a tiny man in a chauffeur’s uniform climbed out, stooping under the weight of four expensive-looking cameras slung around his neck. Bending forward, he stood stock still as the men took turns pulling the straps over his head. While the first three raced back to the overlook and began snapping away, the man in the aviator shades stayed put. Holding the camera’s viewfinder up to his eye, he slowly panned the telescopic lens across the rest area until it pointed straight at Blake’s hiding place.

Staring at the men with their cameras, the thought hit Blake like a thunderbolt: *Could these nut jobs be my contact?*

He glanced at his watch: One minute after seven. It was a gamble he had to take. Shouldering his backpack, he hopped down from his niche and walked uncertainly toward the group. To his surprise, they barely acknowledged his sudden appearance. The only reaction came from the Aviator, who kept his lens trained on Blake’s face as he drew closer.

“Now, *that’s* a sunrise,” Top Hat was remarking sarcastically. “This shot’s going right up on my Facebook page.”

“Excuse me,” said Blake awkwardly. “Uh...can you give a stranger a lift?”

“Well,” said The Cap, turning to stare at him. “Look what the fucking *cat* dragged in! Let me guess: You’re a deserter from the Park Service, seeking political asylum.”

“Personally, I don’t approve of giving rides to strangers,” shuddered Top Hat. “I’ve seen *way* too many horror flicks.”

“Easy, my over-exuberant comrades,” said the Aviator, lowering his camera at last. “After all, a stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet.