

WEDNESDAY DAWN

EMMETT'S PASTURE

Preacher Evan Wycliff found his friend Bob Taggart's body in the early light, about a half-hour after dawn, on the frigid morning of February 29. The light snow from last week had all but disappeared in a brief thaw, leaving a frozen crust on the loamy farmland. The wind was brisk, with a bite. It was a bright day to be glad the roads were safe, salted, and dry. There was no good reason for anyone to get hurt today.

Evan had been on his way to a turkey shoot. But he didn't have a gun and he had no intention of borrowing one. He was going to sit with his friends in the woods, learn how to blow silly, warbling sounds on a reed-whistle turkey call, take greedy gulps of strong coffee laced with whiskey, and — most important in his role as compassionate counselor — make a mighty effort to make sure his friends didn't get so drunk they'd shoot each other accidentally. The others liked him because he told good stories and because he'd laugh at theirs even when they knew their jokes were lame.

Now it had all suddenly gone bad. If only the dreadful event having occurred in a leap year would mean he'd have fewer times to acknowl-

edge its anniversary. The mathematical side of his brain worked that way.

Evan had an analytical mind, which, despite his efforts to the contrary, had drawn him away from his studies of theology and into science. Unanswered questions, whether metaphysical or worldly, would get stuck in his head and plague his thoughts.

Cause of death wouldn't take a forensic expert to explain. Bob had shot himself in the chest. He was wearing his Sunday suit, which was probably his only suit. His starched white shirt had a blood stain about the size of a softball in the center of that once burly but now deflated chest. Here was the entry wound, and Evan didn't need anyone to tell him the big damage would be at the back. When he came upon Bob's motionless, curled-up form resting there in the deserted pasture, he took one look, turned, and promptly retched up the biscuits and redeye gravy he'd had with his morning coffee.

Bob's death probably wasn't the act of a demented man. Evan was sure his friend had been sane. But they had argued recently, which would cause the young preacher recurring pangs of regret.

To this point in his life, Evan's loss of loved ones had occurred at a distance. Those events had been wrenching in their suddenness, but this one was in his face. He didn't have to flip a mental switch to cut off his emotions — he'd already learned the response. He'd never been in combat, never seen a friend fall beside him, but on seeing Bob, the analytical side of his brain took over. He wasn't aware of it, but in this moment he became battle-hardened. As if taking a bullet on the run and not falling, he'd feel the pain much later.

Look, then look harder. And remember.

Looking back at the corpse, Evan rested his hands on his knees as he strained to see and remember details. Bob must have pressed the muzzle of the Sig Sauer pistol to his chest as he fired, nudging his rep tie to the side. The tie was undamaged, knotted with a full Windsor at the neck, and otherwise neatly fixed with his gold Masonic tie tack above the ample tummy, except for a small burn

mark on one side of the fabric. There were other stains, gravy spills that predated the incident. Like the suit, his patriotic Navy tie with the red-and-white stripes was the only neckwear Bob owned.

Because of the angle of the torso on the ground, listing over on its left side, the corpse had bled out the back. Other than the neat, circular stain in the chest, the body looked whole and restful. Bob's eyes were gazing upward and his mouth was open slightly.

Was he trying to say something?

Bob wouldn't have needed both hands to point the pistol at himself, holding the butt in the palm of his hand and squeezing the trigger with his thumb.

But Evan figured most likely Bob would have wanted to use both hands — to steady his resolve. Maybe because holding them together like that in front of him might feel more like praying, a prayer for forgiveness? Or, maybe Bob feared the kick of the powerful weapon would make it fly up, and he'd take it the face. Yes, Evan decided, Bob's last gesture had been a prayerful pose. The knees of his pin-striped, polyester pants were wet where, as he knelt, the last of his warmth had thawed the icy soil.

It took him a while to decide.

A neatly folded piece of white paper protruded from the breast pocket of the suit's jacket. Evan was sorely tempted to pluck it out and study what he assumed would be the suicide note. But he had enough presence of mind to realize, despite his close relationship to the deceased, that he'd better not disturb the scene.

Evan's priority should be to call the cops, at least officially. But considering the early hour and the apparent fact that he'd been the first to stumble upon his dead friend, he had a personal duty to call Bob's wife Edie first.

In the few moments for the call to be connected and for her to pick up, he mentally rehearsed what he would say. All he could think of was

“Edie, I have some bad news.” But she answered on the first ring, and seeing his caller ID, she simply said, “Evan, I know.”

Evan hadn't known Edie Taggart all that long, only since he'd returned home from Back East a year ago. From her pleasant greetings, he'd assumed she was a sweet, kind-hearted person. After all, mild-mannered Bob, who had all but given up on getting married again, had committed to her three years ago, and he'd never shared any serious complaints with Evan. But Edie's was not what you'd call a warm personality. Evan had learned she'd been an accountant by training and trade, presumably now retired. She was a local from the nearby town of Montrose, her maiden name being Clark, which was the name affixed to the town's premier tourist attraction, a renovated Victorian house on the national list of historic places. Evan never knew the family connection, but probably some influential townspeople did — stuffed shirts at the Rotary and the city council. Anyhow, she always expected she'd get the best table at any fine-dining restaurant in the area, of which there were exactly two. Fine dining if you wanted steak or chops in the one place and ribs, dry or wet, in the other.

“I found him” was all Evan managed to say. “There's a note.”

“I got a note, too,” she said. “And it says stay away, don't come looking for him. It says tell the sheriff he's in Emmett's east pasture. So I called it in. You should be seeing them any minute.”

“What can I say?” Evan asked her.

“What is there to say? You know how he's been. I'll put some coffee on. Come by when you've told them whatever you saw. I'll need help with the arrangements.”

He risked telling her, “I'm still here, with him.”

“Is it a godawful mess?”

“No, more like he's taking a nap.”

“As if it makes a difference,” she said and ended the call.

Evan straightened up and surveyed the lonely countryside. It was all

Missouri flatland from here to the horizon. Where he stood was brittle, icy-hard, gnawed-down grass in Joshua Emmett's pasture. Farther off were a couple of acres of matted-down, dried cornstalks. Farther off was a wooded area where some men took their teenage sons squirrel hunting with small-gauge shotguns. They'd go for rabbit or squirrel.

And why, oh why, did the preacher happen to be in this remote place at this ungodly hour of the morning? Nick Berner and Wiley Krause had invited him to their wild-turkey shoot. Evan was wearing a red Kansas City Chiefs ball cap so no one would mistake him for a deer. He said he wouldn't be bringing a rifle, didn't even have one to bring. Nick said not to worry, they wouldn't be loaning him one. No one manages to shoot anything on one of these outings, anyway, he admitted. Dumb as domestic turkeys are said to be (and that's *dumbass* dumb), the wild ones are clever as the dickens. It's just good sport to sit there in the weeds blowing on your turkey call and hoping sooner or later your amateur gobble will attract a hen or challenge a tom to raise its tail feathers in challenge. Then you might just get off a shot if you don't blink. Great sport, and by the time you've drained the whiskey in your flasks, you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn anyway.

Parking on the shoulder of the two-lane state road and traipsing through Emmett's field was the only way to get to where Nick and Wiley would be unless you had a helicopter.

It wasn't coincidental Evan thought about helicopters just then. A squadron of three choppers had flown over as he was locking up his car on the edge of the highway. He didn't think much of it at the time. There being three flying in close convoy, he assumed they were military. They were flying unusually low. He didn't know much about aircraft or their markings. Not usually being up at this time of the morning, he also didn't know whether those flights were routine, but he assumed they were. Locals knew that U.S. Army Fort Francis Blair was located just south of Lake of the Ozarks, east of Lebanon on the interstate, and military traffic, both in the air and on the roads, was a common sight.

Evan considered phoning Nick, who'd invited him to the shoot. Evan didn't have Wiley's number. The preacher didn't know either of them very well. They were Bob's friends, but unlike Evan and Bob, they hadn't grown up here. Evan had only met them when he'd come back home, resettling in the countryside near Appleton City. Since the cops were on their way, he didn't want to go mucking up things by being the first to ask Nick the obvious questions:

Were you expecting Bob for the shoot? Did you hear the gunshot? And where's Brownie?

Bob's ever-faithful Lab-mix dog was nowhere in sight.

Perhaps run off at the sound of the shot. More likely, Bob made her stay at home with Edie.

The fact of the body lying on the path to Emmett's woods suggested Bob knew about the meetup. He'd wanted his friends to find him. Maybe he'd expected it would be Evan.

I don't want to be in the middle of this. Best not to overstep. But something tells me I want to know what happened a lot more than some others might. The cops probably won't care why he did it. Will Edie?

Here came the St. Clair County sheriff's squad cars, two of them, lights flashing, no sirens. Followed by an ambulance.

First to approach was Sheriff Chester Otis himself. He was a large, broad-shouldered man with ebony skin and arms as thick as some men's thighs. He had the rolling gait of a wrestler and the sour look of a man who could smell mendacity. His immaculate gray Stetson looked too small for his round head. He seemed not at all happy to be doing any kind of business before he'd had his second helping of grits and sausage. His ample gut spilled over his hand-tooled black gun-belt and attested to his seldom having to skip a hot breakfast or any meal.

Behind the sheriff were three young male deputies, one red-haired, freckled, and white from the lead car and two lean, close-cropped, military-looking blacks from the other. The junior white guy, the sheriff's sidekick, carried a camera and a toolbox that must have held a

forensics kit. Two paramedics, both female, an overweight white one and the other a trim Asian, were opening the back of the ambulance and setting up a gurney on which was stretched a heavy black-plastic body bag with a head-to-toe zipper.

“Reverend,” the sheriff greeted him with a proffered hand.

Evan returned the manful grip as he confessed, “You understand, I’m not ordained.”

The top cop gave a weak grin and said as he moved past Evan toward the body, “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

As the sheriff stepped carefully around the scene, the red-haired deputy came up behind Evan.

“Friendly warning. Don’t get invested in this,” the fellow snapped.

“He was my friend...,” Evan began, wishing his authority were above the law. He wasn’t sure what to say next.

“I take it you didn’t shoot him.” It was statement with an implied a question, craving but not expecting denial.

As the deputy slipped on a pair of rubber gloves, he introduced himself tersely as Deputy Malcolm Griggs, and he’d be in charge of the scene investigation.

The sheriff circumnavigated the corpse carefully, then bent down to have a closer look, his elbows resting on his thighs. He gestured to Griggs to come over, then pointed to the paper in the breast pocket of the suit. Griggs reached down and retrieved it with a gloved hand, then unfolded the paper, and they both read it. Otis gave a cursory nod, and Griggs slipped the note into a clear plastic evidence bag and tucked it into his toolkit.

Griggs walked back to Evan as Otis lingered near the body.

“What’s in the note?” Evan asked the deputy.

“That would be confidential, for the time being,” Griggs said, then demanded, “And who would you be?”

“Evan Wycliff, friend of the deceased,” Evan repeated pointlessly and gesturing to the body added, “Bob Taggart. Back in the day, when we were boys, we used to play in these fields.”

Griggs attempted to commiserate, offering, “Has to be tough seeing him like this.” Then he resumed his strident tone as he asked Evan, “How do you come to be here? Were you with him when it happened?”

“No. I was heading into the woods over there to meet up with friends and found him like this.”

Griggs shot him a look. “Odd time of day for a pow-wow.”

“Kind of a sunrise prayer breakfast, you could say,” Evan fibbed, not wanting to say he was on his way to make sure two drunken men didn’t do anything crazy with their shotguns.

“We’ll need their names,” Griggs said.

You’re not going to send somebody after them now? Those two officers over there aren’t doing much. Okay, I won’t ask.

Evan remembered to say, “Bob’s dog Brownie. A big, mixed-breed and, well, brown. She was always with him. Could be on the loose, maybe panicked, somewhere around here.”

“We’ll keep an eye out,” the deputy said dismissively.

The sheriff overheard as he approached. “Dogs run home. Smarter than us. No need to freeze our peckers off here, Reverend. Why don’t you come by the office this afternoon and give us your statement? Griggs’ work is going to take a while, and watching paint dry would be more stimulating.” Otis didn’t wait for an answer but muttered, “Hel-luva thing,” as he shivered and stomped back toward his car. As he got in, he shouted back at Griggs, “Well, get a move on! Wilma and Darlene need to get him transported. And have Frank and Nolan here help you with whatever.”

Wilma and Darlene had their gurney set up but wouldn’t touch the body until Griggs had taken his photos. The two other officers were

standing off at a distance by their car, waiting for instructions from Griggs as they shared a smoke and stamped their feet to keep warm.

The sheriff fired up the monster blown-V8 engine of his Crown Vic Police Interceptor. As the car lurched back onto the road, Griggs turned to Evan and said, "Like I said, don't get all invested."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you lost many friends before they got old?"

One who haunts me every day. And now this.

But Evan shook his head. He was in no mood to share with this guy.

Griggs offered with a swagger, "I did two tours, back to back. My friendly advice? The why? The how? I can tell, you're a smart guy, you've got a lot of questions. Don't go there. This is our job." Then he stepped closer to begin his survey of Bob's remains with his camera and added, "And we'll probably never know. Shit happens. Normal guys snap. Now go get warm someplace, and you be sure to drop by later for a chat with the boss. You're not a suspect, not unless I find something I don't expect."