

Buffalo Ridge

Chapter 1

Tom Otto yawned. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the fatigue. Sometimes when the drive was long he would wrap his right arm over his head and try to keep his eyelids open by force. It seldom helped for long.

The worst time came right about sunrise. Except for early summer when the sun rose before 6 a.m., he would be on the road in early morning darkness. In summer, driving east on the two-lane highway, instead of stimulating his senses, the sunlight felt almost like a drug.

He drank thick, strong coffee. It was never enough, and too often it forced him to stop and pee. He had thought about taking something to keep him alert during those early morning hours. He knew other drivers took stuff. Methamphetamines, speed.

So far he had refused. It was a crutch, a weakness, some kind of failure. Then again, if it prevented him from falling asleep at the wheel, perhaps he could justify it. He wouldn't have to tell Jeri.

She would be still be sleeping, her shoulder-length, bronze hair tied up in an unruly clump on top of her head, the way she always wore it at night. She wore it that way at work, too, enclosed in the white bonnet of line workers at the processing plant. Eight hours a day, minus a half-hour lunch and two fifteen-minute breaks, she eviscerated broiler chickens, moving unrelentingly down the line.

After three years, Jeri perpetually carried the odor of raw poultry from her clothes, hair, and skin, but he had become accustomed to it.

At first he opposed her going to work so soon, right after Jade was born. He had hoped that his business would gain traction right from the start, enough to allow her to stay home. All the articles he had been reading convinced him that consumers were eager for "natural" or "organic" meats and vegetables. Maybe that was true in the big cities and on the country's coasts. He believed the demand would grow in small towns on the Midwestern prairie, that some day there would be a fleet of "Tom's Fresh Meats and Produce, Naturally" trucks. Until then Jeri's job made up the difference.

He drove along, heading west away from the bright morning sun now a few degrees above the horizon. It looked like the beginnings of a sweet, perfect June day.

Tom tried to map his route for greatest efficiency. In some cases he asked customers far away from the route to pick up their orders from a drop point at a neighbor's closer to the route.

He made an exception for the Weavers and four other small farms in the area. They supplied him with fresh eggs, whole grains, vegetables in season, lamb, beef, butchered chickens, and goat cheese.

Today, as he turned into the Weavers' driveway, the refrigerated truck inventory included six cases of fresh romaine lettuce. Tom figured he'd depart the farm minus a couple heads of romaine after he picked up some fresh meats and produce.

He always looked forward this stop, perhaps more for the setting and the enthusiastic welcome from the three Weaver kids. Stan and Tulie Weaver raised more than chickens, eggs, sheep, cattle and fresh vegetables on their eighty-acre homestead. When his truck approached the old turn-of-the-century farmhouse, three children from the house, eager to greet him, the oldest often carrying the youngest, who was still learning to walk.

A creek flowed through the farm site about seventy-five yards from the house. The near bank close to the barn stretched out in a carpet of green prairie grasses open to the sun, bright green against the shaded opposite bank where trees grew thick, untrammelled by cattle or hogs.

Buffalo Ridge

Several sheep grazed in the yard around the house, keeping the grass short and fertilized, and saving time that would have been wasted on mowing.

Tulie usually emerged from the farmhouse, following the kids. Stan most likely would be in the barn or one of the fields. Tulie, short for Tulip, had grown up in a commune in northern Idaho in the 1970s.

This morning only the dogs surrounded the truck, barking and wagging their tails. Tom surveyed the farmyard expecting to see the kids.

“Okay, where is everyone?” he said aloud. He shut down the motor and stepped down. The dogs, a little rat terrier-schnauzer cross named Pee Wee, and Henry, a golden retriever-lab, enveloped him with their sniffing, licking snouts. Tom patted their heads and broke free. Looking around, his senses sharpened as he walked toward the farmhouse.

“Hello . . . anybody home?” he called. No kids laughing and talking, no Tulie’s cheerful welcome.

Pee Wee and Henry followed Tom to the kitchen door, their barking replaced by quiet, expectant looks and wagging tails.

Tom rapped on the door. Where is everyone?

He opened the door and entered the back hall, the mud room. “Hey, everybody! It’s Tom. Hello!”

He stood straining to hear a response. It came from somewhere in the house, faintly as if from behind a door. A child crying.

If their pickup had not been parked under the lean-to attached to the barn, Tom might have assumed they weren’t home. The coffee maker with its red “on” light glowing sat half-full on the kitchen counter. A National Public Radio nws broadcast droned from a battery-powered radio on the far end of the seven-foot trestle table jutting out from a wall, the first of many similar tables built by Stan in the single stall garage he converted to a wood-working shop three years ago.

Tom stepped slowly into the kitchen, stopped and strained to listen. The table held three bowls of oatmeal, cups, and pieces of toast—home-made whole grain bread—all looking like a meal in progress.

“Hello! Tulie? Stan? Anybody here?”

He heard the crying again. Not really crying, but more like a sobbing whimper. Dread began seeping into Tom, spreading out into a prickly chill. What’s going on? What happened? Where is everyone?

Then he saw bare feet laying sideways on the floor in the doorway of the back hall connecting the kitchen to Stan and Tulie’s bedroom.

“Tulie! Tulie!”

Tom sprang toward her, then froze.

Tulie lay on her left side, motionless. A dark-red stain spread across the upper part of her nightgown from the ragged edges of a gaping wound. He knelt, reaching for her right wrist to find a pulse, already knowing it would not be there. He gently placed his hand on her forehead. It felt cool and clammy. Her open, unblinking eyes stared vacantly.

Filtering through the shock a deep sadness rose in his chest, then anger. Where’s Stan? Where are the kids? Who did this? Why? Instinct added the questions: Where were the killers and was he in danger?

Buffalo Ridge

Slowly, quietly, Tom stood, tensing against the escape of any sound. He wondered if he should cover Tulie's body with a sheet or blanket, or just leave it alone. If he covered it, it would be for the children's sake.

He crept through Stan and Tulie's bedroom, across the center hallway and into the living room. He peered into the dining room, then headed to the stairs to check the upper bedrooms. His teeth clenched at each creaky groan of the stair boards as he ascended.

He paused at the top of the stairs, reached for his cell phone and pressed 9-1-1.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?" answered a terse female voice.

He spoke quietly, straining to suppress a quaver in his voice. "Hello. This is Tom Otto. I'm at the Stan and Tulie Weaver farm in the southwest part of the county. I just found Tulie's body in the house. It . . . it looks like a shotgun blast killed her."

"Is anyone else there? Are you in danger?" the dispatcher cut in.

"I'm looking for their kids and for Stan. I don't think anyone else is here."

"Stay there. Don't touch anything. Deputies are on the way. We can send an ambulance. Give me the address."

Tom knew the road but couldn't remember the house number. "It's the old Wegman place. Three quarters of a mile east of County Road 30, about seven miles south of Highway 45."

"I need the exact street address," ordered the dispatcher.

"I don't remember. I'll have to look. Everybody around here knows the old Wegman place."

"Well, I'm not everybody." She sounded young, probably a newcomer to the area. So many new people had been arriving in recent years. Tom believed that would help his business grow. Yet he could sympathize with old-timers who saw the familiarity of knowing all their neighbors beginning to fade.

He fumbled in his pocket for his customer list, found the street address and recited it to the dispatcher.

"What's your full name and address? What are you doing there?"

"I'm Tom Otto, 16843 225th Street Northeast. I was delivering produce on my route. You don't need to send an ambulance, at least for Tulie. Send the coroner. I'm going to hang up now and look for Stan and the kids."

"Stay where you are and stay on the line!" the dispatcher commanded.

"I have to find the kids. My phone's losing power."

"Do they have a land line, a regular phone? Call back on that."

"No, they don't. They just have a cell phone, but I don't know where it is."

"Well, you just stay put. It won't be long, and someone will be there. What's your cell number?"

"I'm going to find the kids," Tom replied, the quaver in his voice now from anger instead of fear. He punched the phone's disconnect button. He pushed aside the immediate regret that such an insolent act might haunt him later. He began searching for the kids. He heard it again, a small child's muffled cry.

"Hey, kids. It's me, Tom, Tom Otto," he announced loudly. He stood still to listen for a response, hearing only silence throughout the upstairs hallway and four bedrooms. He walked slowly down the hall, straining to hear anything. He looked in each room, cautiously opening each closet door.

In Stan and Tulie's room, a cat laying the bed looked up nonchalantly at the intruder. "Hey, there Tripod, you know where anyone is?"

Buffalo Ridge

The cat had three legs, the right rear leg having been amputated after it got caught in the manure conveyor in the barn. They allowed it to live in the house instead of the barn like with the other cats. Tom gently stroked the soft, calico coat along its back. The cat responded with a wide yawn, stretching out its limbs front and back.

Tom looked up and out the bedroom window. A far off cloud of dust appeared to speed across a distant field. A vehicle was traveling fast along the gravel township road toward the turn to the long driveway into the Weaver farmstead. If it was a sheriff's deputy, it was an awfully quick response, Tom thought, but he felt relieved that they had arrived. He knew he would have to stay and help, especially with the kids. He still had a truck full of fresh meats and produce to deliver. And without the Weavers, where would Tom get a big part of his produce? Grief would have to wait.

The sheriff's deputy patrol car tore down the driveway, almost skidding to a stop next to Tom's truck. Tom went downstairs and waited just outside the kitchen door. The deputy approached, and Tom held out his hand. "I'm Tom Otto, the guy who called. You sure got here fast for this being down in this neck of the county."

"We patrol down here when we can, or as much as we need to. You said there's a body in there."

"It's Tulie Weaver. She took a shotgun blast at close range."

"I'd like to see some ID," said the deputy. Tom knew many of the officers, but not some of the younger recruits. This guy was only in his late twenties. Hearing the order, Tom suddenly felt apprehensive. He showed the deputy his driver's license, suddenly realizing that everyone—including him—would be a suspect. It became cold reality when the deputy recited the Miranda warning: "You have the right to an attorney. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law." None of the officers who knew Tom would have done that.

"Where is she?" Tom motioned to the hallway behind him.

"You said something about kids. Is there anyone else? A father or husband? Did you see any other vehicles?"

"I thought I heard a child crying or something. I don't know where Stan is. He's the dad. I didn't see any other vehicles," Tom replied calmly. "You think I did this?" He could hardly believe what he had just heard. "The Weavers are good friends, business partners." He glared at the young officer.

The deputy stepped past him into the kitchen. He looked around warily, his right hand resting on the handle of his holstered pistol. He knelt and studied Tulie's body. He went into the bedroom and took the top sheet off the bed. He draped it over the body taking care to keep it from touching the blooded areas. He went back into the kitchen where Tom stood and called in to dispatch on his radio.

"You said they have a cell phone?" the deputy asked. "What's the number? Do you know the number?" Tom nodded and the deputy asked him to dial it on his own cell phone. The deputy turned off the radio on the counter. They strained to listen for any ringing. If they did, Tom anticipated that it would be the energetic notes of the "William Tell Overture."

They stood still, Tom listening to the ring tones from his phone. They could barely hear the faint melody coming from somewhere—it sounded like from below. In seconds the faint sound ceased.

Buffalo Ridge

“Let’s check the cellar,” Tom said. He led the deputy outside around to the cellar door, the old kind with large double doors at an angle against the side of the house. The doors opened to a stairway leading down to a dark, clammy cave-like space surrounded by an ancient stone foundation.

David Weaver clamped his hand over the mouth of his baby brother. Anna Weaver clutched the cell phone. The first few bars of the ring tone had escaped before she could turn it off. Another muffled cry from Jonathan squeezed out between David’s fingers on his mouth.

The deputy handed Tom his flashlight and let him go down the stairway first.

“David? Hello. This is Tom Otto. Everything’s going to be okay. Anna? Are all you kids down here?”

He panned the light around the cellar illuminating shelves of preserved fruits and vegetables in neat rows of Mason jars. A large wooden bin held potatoes. Dried herbs hung from several cords strung across between two shelves.

“C’mon kids. It’s okay. We’re going to help you. Come on out,” Tom pleaded.

Slowly, cautiously, David Weaver stepped from behind a 250-gallon fuel oil tank in one corner. The ten-year-old clutched his one-and-one-half-year-old brother, Jonathan. Anna, who just turned five, followed, grasping a cell phone in both hands. In the bright beam of the flashlight they looked stone-faced. Anna’s eyes glistened in the light. Smudged tracks of tears trailed down her cheeks. They stood mute except for Jonathan who squirmed and whimpered in his brother’s grasp.

Tom walked over and knelt down in front of them.

“Everybody okay? Can you tell us what happened? Is your dad around?”

“I don’t know,” David replied soberly. “I don’t know where dad is.”

“We’re going to look for him,” the deputy said. “Everything’s going to be okay. Did you see anybody? Was anybody else here?”

“We were having breakfast. This car came down the driveway,” David said. “Mom told us to go down here and be quiet.”

What did you hear? Did you hear anything?”

“We heard mom talking to some guys. Then we heard some shots.”

“How long ago was that?” the deputy asked.

“It was just before Tom came. We were going to go back outside. Then we heard Tom’s truck. We didn’t know it was him so we stayed here,” David said, his composure weakening and voice beginning to tremble. Yet he withstood the pressure of tears damming up in his eyes.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Tom said to the deputy. “I’ll take the kids out to the truck. They can wait there, and we can go check out the barn.”

The deputy hesitated, then agreed because it was the logical thing to do. Truck or squad car made little difference.

Tom led the children out of the cellar and helped them climb into the cab of his truck, his anguish for them growing. He tried to comfort little Anna, who cried for her mommy. She was about the same age as his own daughter, Jade. Anna clutched a rag doll with one hand and took David’s hand with the other. Baby Jonathan fussed and squirmed out of David’s grasp, insisting on walking over to the truck. He smiled up at Tom, pointing toward the barn saying, “Dada, Dada.”

It would be at least another ten minutes before reinforcements arrived. That was too long to wait, so the deputy walked toward the barn. Tom hurried across the farmyard to catch up,

Buffalo Ridge

looking back once to see the kids sitting in the truck. They were so trusting, so innocent, at least the two younger ones. David's grim, sober expression hadn't changed.

"Why isn't the boy in school? Don't they ride the bus out here?" the deputy asked as they approached the barn.

"They're home-schooled," Tom replied. "Tulie taught them."

At the barn the deputy gave an "are you ready for this?" look over his shoulder at Tom, then opened the smaller door.

Back in the 1940s and 1950s that big barn stood out among others in the neighborhood for its size, its white-painted walls and red-shingled roof, a towering cap with broad, graceful arcs sweeping down from the peak to eaves on the sides, then flipping slightly outward.

When the Weavers bought the farm eight years ago, the barn needed a lot of repair, which Stan did even before they fixed up the house. As in the old days, the hay loft held small mountains of sweet-scented alfalfa and grass hay. Twelve milk cows stood in their tie stalls, munching hay and, this morning, bawling about their swollen udders needing to be milked. The goats wandered around in a pen waiting for their turn. They looked up curiously at the opening door.

The deputy held his left hand outstretched behind him, telling Tom to stay put. His right hand drew his nine millimeter Smith and Wesson from its holster. He walked slowly down the center aisle looking into each stall as he passed by.

He stopped, listening. Tom heard it too, the muffled whoosh of tires on a gravel road. The sheriff's squad car pulled to a skidding stop, leaving a dust cloud drifting across the farmyard. The deputy resumed his surveillance, this time announcing loudly, "Stan. Stan Weaver. Are you here, Stan?"

They could find no sign of Stan Weaver other than his well-cared for livestock, neat rows of tools, and clean barn. Tom followed the deputy out of the barn to meet the sheriff approaching them.

"The coroner's on his way. So, what do we got?" the sheriff asked.

The deputy looked toward Tom's truck. The two older Weaver kids stared at the men through closed windows. Little Jonathan sitting on David's lap looked to be squirming and crying.

"There's a body in the house. Tom Otto here says it's Mrs. Weaver. What did you say her name was, Tulip?"

"Yes. Everyone calls her Tulie," Tom said.

"Anybody else here besides the kids?" the sheriff asked.

"We were looking in the barn for Stan, Tulie's husband," Tom said.

The sheriff shot him an "I wasn't talking to you" look. "You go wait by your truck. Stay with the kids," he ordered.

"I can help you look for Stan. The kids'll be okay."

"Other officers will be here soon. I want you to stay with the kids," the sheriff said in a firm but even voice.

Tom conceded. He offered some suggestions about where to look for Stan if he wasn't in the barn. The sheriff and deputy walked toward the machine shed. Tom climbed into his truck. He lifted Jonathan from David's lap to his own. The toddler responded with a curious gaze. Tom smiled and his blue eyes captured Jonathan's attention, for a moment.

Buffalo Ridge

“I want mommy. Where’s daddy?” Anna began to cry again, ending David’s brief respite from wrestling with his younger brother.

“I don’t know. Stop crying,” David commanded.

“We’ll find your folks.” Tom tried to sound reassuring. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

By this time David understood that this clearly was not true.

“I have to go potty,” Anna whined.

Failing to dissuade her, Tom lifted Jonathan back to David’s lap. He took Anna’s hand and they walked to the outhouse behind the farm house. Visiting the Weaver farm was like going back in time sixty, seventy, maybe a hundred years. No power line connected the farm to the rural electric co-op lines. No electric pump drew water from a deep well, no indoor plumbing except for the kitchen sink—a hand pump drew water from a cistern in the basement. Water drained to an old, leaky cesspool in the backyard.

An eighty-foot-tall wind generator provided up to twenty kilowatts of electricity, some stored in batteries to be available when the wind speed dropped. Stan had rigged up minimal electric and water service to the house, but for a toilet they still used an outhouse.

“I’m hungry. I want more breakfast,” Anna whined when they walked past the kitchen door heading back to the truck. “Where’s mommy?”

A small caravan of vehicles swept into the farmyard, a dark green, full-sized sedan in the lead, followed by another sheriff’s patrol car, a big black Ford Expedition with dark-tinted windows, and an older, small foreign compact. Tom thought it looked like a late eighties vintage Subaru, and clearly out of place with the other vehicles.

The big sedan hadn’t finished settling back to a stop and its transmission jammed into Park before the front passenger door flew open. A man wearing a dark suit leaped out and ran back toward the Subaru. He jerked open the driver’s door and appeared to be yelling something and gesturing, his right arm pointing back toward the driveway.

A young man in the Subaru argued back, a defiant look on his face.

“You get the hell out of here!” the dark suit commanded loudly. “This is private property. We’re investigating a possible crime scene. You want the story, you call me later.”

“Can’t I just get a couple photos?” the young man pleaded.

“Hell no! You try and I’ll stick that camera up your ass!”

“This is public information! You can’t keep me out of here,” the reporter protested.

“You can kiss my ass! Now scram!”

The reporter turned the wheel and backed the Subaru around sideways across the driveway, and using his left hand turned the wheel out toward the road. His right hand reached for his camera. He twisted off the 35 mm lens and clicked on the telephoto lens. When he felt far enough from the BCI state agent he stopped, hung out the car window and pressed the shutter release with motor drive turned on, slowly panning the camera after each click. The last frame caught the agent glaring and flipping him the bird. The reporter leaned back in and gunned the engine back out onto the road and towards town.