

The lead vehicle, a dark sedan, edged slowly into the clearing that brooded under towering pines. The bishop ordered, “Stop here.” Behind the lead car, a big van waited on the narrow forest road.

The driver nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Is the site ready?”

“Yes, sir.” The driver cut the engine. “Virgil and Clinton say the shack—”

The bishop waved him silent and gazed quietly at the ancient weathered hulk, at its moss-covered shingles, its gray walls of gapped and mismatched boards, its warped door. “There is a window?”

“Yes, sir. Around the corner from the door. Clinton broke out the glass and nailed a couple two-by-fours across it.”

“Good.” The bishop pointed toward two two-by-fours resting against the wall beside the door. “Tell me.”

“When we're ready, Virgil will nail them across the door. There will be no chance of escape.”

The bishop nodded again. “Well done. And the witnesses?”

“Here.” He pointed to where a large rectangle had been cleared of its weeds, down to the dirt. It was about ten feet long, maybe six wide.

The bishop considered it for a long moment.

“Unsatisfactory, sir?”

But the bishop shook his head. “Acceptable.” He pointed at the edge of the forest, behind the rectangle. “What is that pile?”

A mound of junk rested against the trunk of one of the towering ponderosas hemming the clearing.

“It's the cabin's contents, sir. We wanted nothing left inside that could be used.”

“To escape?”

“Yes, or for suicide.”

“Excellent.”

“Sir, I have a question.”

“What?”

“Are you worried someone will see the smoke?”

The bishop took a long breath. “Perhaps. But it will not last long, and I cannot afford to wait. The lesson must be taught and then we move the product on.” He pointed beside the bare ground of the rectangle. “Direct Guy to park the van there, and station Virgil and Clinton in their places. Then we will begin.”