

# Running Out

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When the deep shadows finally came in he sprung out of a cluster of junipers and made a run for the mountain's stark cliffs. He'd come all the way from the rim country, circling the long valley and the ranches that flickered in the growing darkness. The flat open country was dangerous but there was no other way to reach the mountain except to go through the fences that covered the darkening pastures.

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Brenny pulled the pickup in close to the swing gate. His back stiffened but his legs took the rise. A gentle rain began to cover his face as he opened the gate. He didn't like the monsoon season. It made the dogs lazy. They were lying against the blankets in the back of the truck. Stoner, the new dog, got up and wagged his tail. Brenny patted him on the rump, then leaned in to check on Busher and Chloe. Boog and Skeeter didn't budge.

"Pretty soon, guys," he said as they moved onto the ranch. He got back out to lift the twisted wires over the gate's end post to secure it. In a few minutes they'd be at the bunkhouse. He could get a hot breakfast before starting out.

Ed Ruttner, the ranch manager, suddenly appeared in the headlights, and Brenny had to drive around him to park in the back. Ruttner was at the truck's door before it even stopped.

"Bad business," he said.

"It's only bad business when you start using the place for a playground," Brenny said.

"They're here. Execs, kids, wives...one a them even brought his goddamn maid."

"They still in bed?"

"They're getting Ostrow up now."

"I sure could use some pancakes."

"Jeeesus, Brenny. You gotta get on this right away. Ostrow's pissed. We're trying to keep it under wraps." Brenny reached in between the dogs to pull out his blankets and saddle while Ruttner picked up the thermos. "I'll get some fresh coffee for you," he said. "Sorry you're not gonna have time for breakfast. Didn't mean to spoil your birthday. I could tell that Mary was pissed about it too."

Brenny's wife had taken Ed's emergency call. The job had become a strain between them. She kept telling him he was spending a lot more time out on the trail. When he denied it, she surprised him with a packet of torn off calendar pages. Everytime he'd been out she colored in the days with a red crayon, as if he'd been missing-in-action.

"Yeah, I can understand her being pissed," he finally said to Ruttner. "We were going to celebrate my big fives. It'll have to wait."

"I tried not to drag you out," he said. "Even tried taking care of it myself. We waited for the cat to come back but she never showed."

"How do you know it's a female?"

"Well, hell, one of our calves is ripped to shreds. You know how messy lion cubs can get. Trees are clawed up too."

Brenny knew the female. He had left her alone because she'd never gone after the stock. He hadn't seen her for awhile. That might've meant she'd gone into heat or even had a litter. She

could've run into a problem feeding her cubs and taken down a cow to make things easier.

One of the cowboys opened the stable door. They'd already taken out his horse. Old Dusty stood in the barn's dim light. Brenny set the blanket before swinging the saddle up on her. He'd almost finished tightening the cinches when Ostrow showed up in pressed jeans, bright plaid shirt, and a new ranch hat covered with a fitted piece of shiny plastic to keep off the rain. He moved slow and stiff. Brenny figured he must've bought the new boots for the occasion.

"We don't like this business anymore than you do," Ostrow said in a tone that made Dusty take a nervous step backwards. "I've been trying to keep a cap on things until you got here."

"I'm just heading out to look at the damage," Brenny said, and another young cowboy handed him his thermos and a package of what looked like sweet rolls. Brenny led Dusty out into the light rain and they headed for the truck to get the rest of his gear. Ostrow kept pace with him through the muddy driveway.

"I guess this is all just a lotta bullshit to you, Mr. Hartrey," he said, in that same annoying tone.

"Things like this happen out here," Brenny answered.

"My execs work their asses off all year and look forward to coming out to the ranch, having a good time, and getting some work done. I don't want anything to get in the way of that."

"Mountain lions come and go. They eat, sleep, drink, and have their cubs. Last thing they want to do is run into some corporate executive."

"I want that damn lion out of the way. If you can't do it I'll get someone who can. I expect results, Mr. Hartrey," he said. Brenny

dragged out his old saddlebag, then reached in for his Winchester. Ostrow had already started back to the barn.

Ever since Tritech bought Webb Ranch it meant ten days of intensive corporate summer meetings. City dudes flying in from all over the country for seminars, fishing, and horseback riding in the Arizona mountains. Ostrow didn't want his executive vacations ruined by some mountain lion getting in too close to the lodge. Nothing got in the way of a Tritech executive on his way up.

Brenny watched the little man walk away in the rain. He felt like quitting but knew it'd only take a few hours to replace him. He'd been the sole protector of the Webb Ranch for nearly twenty years. In his own way he'd kept the balance. The cattle grazed, the mountain lions had their young, grew old, and moved on. The original owner had hired him to protect the cattle, but times had changed. Now the corporation was in charge. They were sending him out to kill a lion so the executive families could feel safe. The fact that a lion was out there frightened a man like Ostrow. Three of his calves had been ripped apart. He wanted the lion's ass. Six feet of fur to hang on some office wall in Dallas or Chicago.

The pink light of sunrise barely began to break across the sky. Brenny slipped the rifle through the worn leather scabbard and let the dogs out of the truck. They ran across the driveway, sniffing and pissing on the corners of the bunkhouse. The soft drizzle began to let up as they made their way to the fence. He could hear Boog's low growl warning the new dog to stay in close. The sounds of morning melted into Dusty's clopping steps and the squeak of the saddle. Brenny began feeling good again. There were a whole lot of noes waiting for

him out there. No phones, no wife, no home, no Ostrow, nada. Once he passed through the fence, down along the edge of the pond and out through the grove of trees, he'd be alone again. The only true peace he knew anymore.

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An early glow broke over the mountains as Brenny headed for the pasture where the feasting ravens had gathered. He turned the horse, clucked to the dogs, then headed straight for the shade. He tied Skeeter, Busher, Chloe, and the new dog, Stoner, to separate trees so they wouldn't get in the way. He and Boog didn't have much time. The cat had probably hung around the kill for the past few nights, heading off in a different direction each time. There was usually a lot of tracks around a carcass. Boog's job was to find the freshest one.

When they approached the kill the ravens squawked and flew into the trees. Boog sniffed at the carcass, looking for a track. The ground around the dead calf had been torn up just like Ruttner said. When Brenny glanced over at the birds he saw where the trees had been clawed. The marks were too high for lion cubs and female pumas rarely did anything like that.

Boog moved easily through the grass and Brenny followed him to a second dead calf. This kill was even older. Insects had taken over. Boog high-stepped around it, sniffing the ground, whining in frustration. It was difficult to pick up an old scent in this weather even for a good strike dog like Boog.

When they started back he lost sight of the dog in the tall August weeds. Then he heard him bark and a raven took flight. Brenny stopped to look for the carcass. The calf's head barely stuck out of the grass.

The Webb Ranch brand, a W with a wavy line under it, had been clearly marked on the calf's hind quarters. Boog circled the carcass. Brenny froze so he wouldn't destroy any tracks before the dog had a chance to find them. When he looked down he saw the fresh paw prints all around him. Going and coming. The lion must have come back to the kill several times.

Brenny bent down in the wet soil to get a closer look. The dampness seeped through his jeans as he took out his reading glasses. The kill had been made about fifteen or twenty yards away then dragged into the dense brush. He guessed, from the size of the tracks, that a male lion had done the damage. The cat made the kill with a blow to the neck. Then a spine severing bite. He had to be big. It took great strength to drag that large a calf into the brush and hide it.

Brenny figured a transient male was moving through the territory. He probably made the first kill, then the female and her cubs stumbled onto it. The male returned, saw it'd been eaten, and went looking for another calve. He was probably looking for a territory to settle down in. That became harder to do these days. There was too much development going on. The ranchers were selling out, and track houses were pouring in. Huge developments with man-made waterfalls and pools. Solitary predators like the puma were being forced to adjust to less territory, and a lot less game. Land was running out. It got harder everyday to find any unclaimed territory. In the end, this transient would probably have to fight for it down the line. It was just a matter of where and when.

Boog's sharp cry bit the morning air. The other dogs barked back. Brenny got up stiffly, making his way around the dead calf to the

other side of the high brush. He caught up with the dog where the high weeds ended in a low flat area. Boog's dark tail waved as he stood protecting a small patch of matted grass.

"What've you got, boy?"

Brenny knelt, put his arm around the dog, and stared at the fresh print between Boog's front paws. Only a few hours old. If the lion had been in that close he must've heard the dogs barking. Still, with a track like that the dogs could probably catch up with him before he bedded down in the heat of the day.

"Good boy," Brenny said, patting old Boog. Then he left his yellow slicker to mark the spot and headed back to get the other dogs.

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Brenny had been up on Dusty for over an hour. Boog trotted along next to him, letting Skeeter lead them up the ridge. Sunlight broke over Simmons Peak, rushing down over the miles of ranches below. The Santa Maria Mountains were caught in a mist but he could see that the sun would eventually win the battle. He hoped the lion's scent wouldn't dry out. The tracks moved out of the brush and Brenny hung down off the saddle to follow them. The spacing between the tracks were bigger than he'd ever seen before.

When he turned to look for the dogs, they disappeared around a bend heading for Granite Mountain and the long rocky washes that ran straight to a peak about eight thousand feet up. He heard a lot of yapping ahead but couldn't distinguish the sounds. The dogs all seemed to be barking at once. He turned his horse in toward the hill, riding her on a sharp angle through the scrub oak. Leaning forward in the saddle, he coaxed Dusty toward the barking. He rode up to a

small crest, wrapped the reins in the brush, then took his rifle and ran to the rim. The barking had become a riot of noise where Chloe had staked out a dead doe. The lion must've jumped her higher up and the struggle had gone down to where the carcass had finally been dragged under some shade trees. It'd been a dangerous kill. The lion couldn't reach the top of the deer's neck, so had to go underneath it. The flank had been ripped open and was still bleeding.

Brenny heard barking on the other side of a large boulder. He found Boog and Skeeter guarding a sycamore. When they saw him coming their barking turned into whines. Brenny stopped about thirty feet from the tree, searching its branches until he found the mountain lion hissing at them from a narrow crotch about half way up. It was the female. He looked around for her cubs, hoped the dogs hadn't killed them, then realized that Busher and Stoner were under another tree further down the hill. Two lion cubs hung precariously from a juniper just out of reach of the new dog's playful leaps.

"It's all right, Busher," he said. The dog came running to him but Stoner kept leaping at the cubs.

He reached inside his jacket for the package the cowboy had given him in the barn that morning. Busher and Chloe stood watching him undo the rubber bands while Skeeter and Boog came up the hill after them. When the outer package came undone, Brenny pulled the last few sticky pieces of wrapping off the sweet rolls. He opened his jackknife to cut off a large piece. The smell of cinammon sliced the air.

"You first, Skeeter," he said. The dog gently took the piece of roll from his hand. "Good boy," Brenny whispered, patting the dog's head



and ears. Skeeter had made a mistake. Somewhere on the other side of the hill the lion tracks had crossed. The dog had picked up the female instead of following the large male. "You're still the best, Skeeter," Brenny said in her defense.

He gave the rest of the roll to Boog, then cut the next one into thirds for Busher, Chloe, and the young dog, Stoner. The lioness looked hungry too and she growled to reassure her cubs, hanging like Christmas ornaments in the juniper. She killed the doe but hadn't gone after the cattle. That's why he'd always left her alone. The cubs had been a strain on her. Probably her first litter. They looked healthy. She'd done a good job and he knew she wouldn't leave that tree without them.

If he killed her, toted her back to the ranch, the whole matter of satisfying the corporate picnic would be over. He'd be an instant hero, probably get a raise. The only loss would be some lioness wearing a government collar.

"All right, gang," he said. "We're leaving this lady and her pups alone." The dogs wagged their tails. "We're going back and get it right." Boog started up the hill to where Brenny had tied the horse. The old dog had already gone back to work.

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It took Boog over an hour to find the spot where the tracks had crossed. Then the dogs moved in tandem, finding the male's smell on the brush, or along the rocks. Skeeter might have been the best tracking dog in the territory but it was Brenny's job to keep them moving in the right direction. Deer are a lot easier for a dog to follow because they leave a sharp track. The lion has a soft pad that's harder to see.

When Brenny saw some fresh scratch marks on a large cedar, he clucked at the dogs, heading them up along the boulders. The lion had to be eight feet or more. He'd worked these mountains over twenty years but never saw a cougar that big before. The dogs raced past him in a rush, moving toward the peaks. Granite Mountain's the perfect place for a cougar. Enormous rocks tossed together like a petrified salad. Its highest peaks are stark. The rest spreads out over several treacherous miles. Brenny cut across a switchback to catch up with the dogs. Boog was waiting for him, but he didn't see the others.

"What's up, boy?" he asked.

The dog stood in front of a barbed-wire fence that was hidden in the overgrown brush. If he crossed that wire, he'd be into a government wildlife area. Dusty cantered easily to where Boog waited. The rest of the dogs were already on the other side.

"You know what happens if we get caught in there. Lots of screaming and threatening," he said to the dog, as he opened the worn saddlebag to take out the clippers. "There's a big buck-ass-fine for cutting government wire." Boog yawned.

Brenny had to narrow his eyes against the glare of the sun. He scanned the trails below, making sure there weren't any stray hikers, then snipped the barbed wire and bent it away from the post. He pulled the fence out to let Dusty through, then forced the wire back into place so the cut couldn't be spotted.

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Storm clouds rolled in over the mountains. The big cat watched the lightning tear through the curving shapes. An intense heat made the air feel heavy and slowed his climbing. He came up on a rim of low

juniper and reached in to sweep away the loose rocks. He took a deep breath of air, and smelled the rain in it.

A movement shimmered in the heat below, darting in and out of the brush. Coyote. He slumped down under the juniper, into its damp shade, and waited for the storm to hit.

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Brenny lifted the heavy canteen off the saddle and Boog and Skeeter turned back when they saw him reach for it. The new dog, Stoner, trotted easily behind them, keeping his distance. "That rain could cut into our day," Brenny said to them, pouring water into a pan. Boog moved to drink first. Then Skeeter squeezed in next to him. They drank together in long, loud gulps. The younger dog edged in closer. "You've been pretty good today, boy," Brenny said, pouring some water into the cup of his hand. The young dog trotted the last few steps for the earned drink.

When Busher and Chloe didn't come for a drink, it usually meant they were getting close to the lion. Brenny poured another handful of water for Stoner, and listened for Busher's bark. The only sound was the flat growl of jet planes leaving their white streaks across the sky. Granite Mountain stood directly under the New York to Los Angeles flight pattern. Businessmen, tourists, and plastic food trays hurtled daily over the struggle of man and beast running out below. Neither understood the other, and they never would.

Brenny poured more water into the empty pan. Skeeter took a few gulps before disappearing into the deep shade. Stoner hesitantly approached, drank the rest of the water, then sat at Brenny's feet.

Dusty danced a nervous step as a sudden wind rushed down the

mountain. Brenny steadied her. "Easy, girl," he said. "Just the rain coming in." Another crooked stick of lightning hit. Brenny counted the seconds before he heard its low rumble. They had about an hour to find the lion or it'd be just a long walk home in the rain.

Stoner whined and the brush began to wave in the breeze. Brenny glanced over at Boog and Skeeter but they didn't move. "You hear something, boy?" Brenny asked the young dog. Stoner turned to stare up at the peak. He barked sharply, waited, then barked again. Boog jumped up to move in next to him. The older dog's ears stiffened. Then he started up the trail with the new dog right behind him. Brenny reached back for Dusty's reins. They moved out so fast the horse nearly stepped on Skeeter who had run under her to catch up with the others.

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They were suddenly there on top of him and he rolled out from beneath the juniper, catching one of them under the chest. It howled. Then he felt a sharp pain run up along his back leg. The other one had gotten in behind him. Springing to higher ground, he looked back through the flying dust. They weren't coyotes. The smaller one kept barking at him while the other crawled through the dust along the narrow wash. He shrieked at them and their barking stopped. A sharp pain ran up his back leg, where it had been torn open, and a nausea hit him. He moved quickly between the boulders, looking for a place to hide.

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Brenny could hear the barking but he'd lost sight of the dogs again. When he reached the ridge, just below the steep climb to the top, he

had to go around a pair of huge boulders. Boog stood rigid on the other side, guarding something in the wash. Busher was lying dead among a rash of loose stones. He looked around for Chloe but didn't see any sign of her.

Brenny hid Busher's broken body under the juniper, covering her with his jacket. He tied Dusty in close to the rocks, pulled out his Winchester, then noticed the fresh tracks of blood. He reached down to touch the heavy red splotches, smearing his fingers in it, then raising the red stain to his mouth. The blood lingered on his tongue and knotted his throat. He knew that taste.

He finally caught up with the dogs, following the cat's trail up the mountain. Lightning ripped the low clouds, throwing roars of thunder behind it. If he stopped now, they'd lose the track in the rain. Brenny glanced at the stark cliffs on the north face. The three dogs ran just ahead of him. Skeeter, his head low, sniffed along the large rock formation leading to the peak. Boog stayed in close, but the new dog dropped back when the cat's high scream rushed down at them.

Brenny took off his slicker, threw it aside, making a wide turn to come up behind them. The cat had placed himself behind a granite wall that split straight up to the top of the mountain. If he fired a shot, he might force the cat out but didn't want to lose anymore dogs. The only other choice was to climb over him to the peak while they had him trapped.

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The hind leg pained as he shifted his weight away from the growling dog, pacing the ledge in front of him. A brown muzzle came snarling in close to him and he screamed back at it in anger. The dog retreated

so fast it nearly stumbled off the narrow ledge.

He pulled back as far as he could, waiting for the dogs to come in closer, then jumped at the granite wall. His long body arced off it, catching one of the dogs full on the shoulder. It rolled in the dust, he swiped again, and the dog tumbled away. He turned swiftly to face the large black and tan standing his ground. A younger dog stood behind him, whining in the wind.

He leaped up across the boulders. A sharp pain ran through his leg but it lifted him out of the cleft. There was another long jump to the far ledge. He couldn't be sure if his leg would hold this time. A drenching rain suddenly hit in large heavy drops turning everything into a blur. He crouched, looked up into the downpour, then jumped.

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The storm hit Brenny just below the deep cleft in the mountain. He had to take off his boots so he wouldn't slip on the algae. His clothes had gotten so heavy he could hardly move in them. He ripped off his shirt, letting the cool rain bite his chest and shoulders, then slipped out of his pants. The water gushed across the rocks in a rushing stream, falling off the cliff on the other side. He finally reached the top of the cleft, dropped to his knees, and peeked over the edge. The cougar was gone.

A chill ran through his body. Sensing something, he looked up to see the huge, powerful head staring down at him. He cradled the Winchester and tilted his head toward the sight. Like some pagan god, the lion looked as if he were part of the mountain itself. There'd be no second chance. A blinding light suddenly hit just below the ledge, bouncing in a thin blue flash toward the rifle barrel.

A sudden bolt of heat hit Brenny's chest, throwing him backwards into a pool of sizzling water. He had an incredible thirst, then realized there was no sound to the hail bouncing off his face. He'd been hit by lightning and thrown into a gushing stream of rain water. Pieces of ice were melting on his eyes. Raising himself on his arm, he felt the deep weakness from the strike and fell back into the water. A familiar smell moved over his him. It was old Boog. He tried to call the dog's name but his strength kept fading like the rushing water running out off the edge.

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The lion limped across the rocks, waiting to see which way the men on the horses would go. He took a last look at the lifeless form on the lower ledge. The black and tan had crawled up on the man's chest to protect him, and he could smell its panting fear.

The line of horsemen had started their final climb to the peak. He could hear them urging the horses as he limped down the other side, along the boulders. It'd be slow going because of his wounded leg, but he'd try to get down the mountain before the daylight ran out on him. □