

An Excerpt from

Astride A Pink Horse

By Robert Greer

Chapter 1

If Lyle Sudderman had been paying attention to his surroundings instead of twisting his grease-stained U.S. Postal Service letter carrier's cap nervously from side to side on his head and muttering obscenities to himself, he might have realized sooner that the brown lump lying between a knot of sagebrush and a small boulder just inside a sagging cyclone fence fifty yards away wasn't a dead steer or a mule deer that had somehow nosed its way onto the fenced-off patch of government land. Despite his current state of fluster, Sudderman, a longtime poacher, decided that the high cost of store-bought meat required at least a quick peek.

It occurred to him that the mysterious lump lying amid several industrial-looking steel-and-concrete structures could also be a human body. He swallowed hard, eased his postal truck onto the highway shoulder, and stared at the mile-square fenced-off parcel of Wyoming heartland just off Grayrocks Road, six miles northeast of the small farming and ranching community of Wheatland.

It was windless and a sweltering 98 degrees. He was a little ahead of schedule, it was almost time for lunch, and he needed to think for a moment. He stared at the lump in the field once again and realized that it hadn't moved in all the time he'd been watching it. Thinking, God forbid I should get accused of letting my freaking engine idle and use one extra ounce of precious U.S. government gas, he killed the truck's engine and jammed his bulky key ring with its fifteen keys, a penlight, and a Moose Lodge medallion into a pants pocket. He sat back in his

seat, glanced across the highway at the Laramie River Station power plant with its sixty-story-high smokestacks, smiled, and muttered, “Been here before.”

Over a quarter century as a faithful government servant, and what was he about to get as a reward for his loyalty? A fucking cut in pay. Come October, the Postal Service planned to eliminate a day of mail delivery from his route, and that meant a smaller paycheck. This time around, his twenty-six-year membership in the National Association of Letter Carriers wouldn’t help, nor would his ass-kissing and glad-handing. Word had come down from the postmaster general himself, and Lyle knew he wouldn’t be able to avoid being part of the cuts. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been so quick to buy the twenty acres he’d purchased in the Laramie Mountains the previous winter.

Turning his attention back to the mysterious lump, Lyle stepped out of his truck after making certain that the warning flashers were on and headed across the thirty-acre patch of swampy riverbottom grass.

A two-mile-long stretch of finger canyons marked the northern edge of the river bottom. Rolling, treeless, tobacco-brown hills, seared by the August heat, rose above the canyons. Thinking that for some reason the mosquitoes seemed to be less pesky than usual,

Lyle worked his way toward the fence that marked the northern boundary of the government parcel. When he was a few yards from the fence, a swirling wind tunneled its way from the river bottom through willows and cottonwoods until every tree and shrub seemed to quiver. Lyle glanced over his shoulder toward the power plant before jogging the rest of the way to the fence and scaling it, as he had many times with friends during his boyhood.

Inside the compound, he found himself staring at what was mostly vacant land—land that in his youth, he and his friends had laughingly dubbed “ground zero.” He glanced around at the

half-dozen “No Trespassing” signs wired to the fence until his eyes found a single rusted metal sign that defined with certainty where he was. The sign simply read, “T-11.”

Making his way past a three-foot-high flat concrete structure that had always reminded him of a home-plate-shaped foundation for a home, he paused for a moment to glance around at the compound’s seven telephone poles. Once during his teens, he and several friends, on a dare, had climbed every telephone pole inside the boundaries of Tango-11, laughing and challenging one another as the power-plant smokestacks across the highway belched clouds of orange smoke and steam. Even then, they knew what the government had at one time housed behind the cyclone fences.

Lyle looked at the concrete pad and rail spur that had once been the heart of T-11, then swallowed hard before walking to within a few feet of what had brought him there. Suddenly he was laughing, fidgeting with his cap, and stamping his feet as he realized that what he was looking down on was neither a dead man, a steer, nor an antelope but simply a knotted-up, buckskin-colored blanket with a mass of tumbleweeds trapped inside. The Wyoming wind had blown the ratty old bedcover against a tire-sized piece of concrete.

Shaking his head and wondering how he could have mistaken a blanket and a bunch of tumbleweeds for any kind of animal, he mumbled, “Shit,” tugged at the bill of his cap, and turned to leave. He’d retrieved his keys from his pocket when it occurred to him that, though his poaching venture had come to nothing, there nonetheless was something oddly out of place in Tango-11. It took him a while to zero in on it, although he realized later it should have been obvious to him the second his feet had landed inside the fence. As the azure sky seemed to swallow the entire abandoned Tango-11 nuclear-missile site, he could see that, less than thirty paces from where he stood, the hatch cover over the personnel-access tube, a twenty-four-inch-

diameter shaft that rose from deep in the ground to poke its head three feet in the air, was propped partially open. The adjacent fifty-by-fifty-foot concrete slab that covered the site's more important nuclear-missile payload bore looked undisturbed.

Lyle removed his cap and scratched his head in dismay. Never once during his dozens of teenage late-night visits to Tango-11 had he seen that hatch cover raised.

With his heart racing and his left eye twitching, the forty-four year-old postal worker strolled cautiously toward the charred looking hatch cover. He'd once heard from a friend in the air force that a hatch cover like the one he was staring at weighed all of 2,700 pounds, and he knew from his mostly forgotten high school Wyoming history studies that the mobile concrete-and-steel slab that covered the missile silo itself weighed at least a hundred tons. Knowing full well that something that weighed over a ton couldn't have popped open on its own, he suppressed the urge to shout, in some strange homage to his youth, Buddy, Clint, Sammy, Will, come have a look! When he was a couple of feet away from the hatch cover, he could see that a rusted metal hook, the kind commonly attached to the heavy-duty chains that local ranchers and farmers used to pull their tractors and backhoes out of swampy pastures, was keeping the hatch cover open. He whispered, "Damn," as his eyes followed a chain that was attached to the hook down into the darkness of the access tube.

He had no idea how deep the access tube sank into the sandy Wyoming soil, but with a belly-up-to-the-bar, can-you-top-this tale now swirling through his head, he knew he was going to have a look down its throat.

Taking his penlight and keys from his pocket, he leaned against the hatch cover and tried to shine the light down into the access tube, but he couldn't see much beyond the V-shaped opening. Laying his keys and penlight aside, he tried without success to shift the cover until,

winded and sweating, he decided he'd need a lever of some sort. When he spotted a five-foot-long tree limb, he ran to get it, returned, and jammed one end of the limb beneath the hatch cover, wedging it into place. With the concrete lip of the access tube serving as his fulcrum, he plopped all 245 of his portly pounds down on the far end of the tree limb and crossed his fingers.

The hatch cover rose with a squeaky, resistant groan until it was almost perpendicular to the sky, then stopped with a single loud click. Rivulets of sweat trickled down the back of Lyle's neck as, smiling and flushed with success, he tossed the tree limb aside and scooped up his keys and penlight. Standing just inches from the hook, he leaned over the open access tube and aimed the penlight's beam directly down into the earthy-smelling bore. At first he couldn't see anything, but as his eyes accommodated to the darkness and he followed the chain down from the hook, he was able to make out two dark, flat objects about fifteen feet below him. The objects, which reminded him of the wooden paddles he'd played paddleball with as a boy, were pressed tightly against the tube's curved steel wall. For several seconds he stared down at the oddly shaped objects, recognizing finally that they were touching one another. When he realized that they were much narrower than his boyhood paddles and that each one appeared to be attached to something long and stick-like that extended perpendicularly away from it and deeper into the access tube, he muttered, "Damn."

It was only when he poked his head, an arm, and the penlight deeper into the access tube that he realized that the chain next to him wasn't looped around paddles at all, or even around a couple of bizarre pieces of military hardware left over from the Cold War, but instead around two human ankles, and that the two flat objects he'd been staring at so intently were the soles of two human feet.

A rush of adrenaline shot through him, and the suffocating mucus of fear plugged his

nostrils as he gawked at the unmistakable curvature of a man's buttocks. Thinking that he was staring at a kind of naked bungee jumper who'd decided to dive headfirst into an abandoned nuclear-missile access hole, he let out a guttural, primordial wail that belched up from the depths of his being and echoed off the access tube's walls as he sprang back from the hatch cover and bolted for his truck.

When pressed later by the Platte County sheriff, and then by the Warren Air Force Base Office of Special Investigations major who'd quickly arrived from Cheyenne to interrogate him about why he'd entered the Tango-11 site and what he'd found, Lyle Sudderman found it difficult to remember the exact sequence of events from his midday odyssey. He remembered rescaling the Tango-11 fence after finding the dead man, and he recalled tripping his way across undulating river-bottom pastureland to dial 911 from the cell phone in his truck. He remembered the hatch cover and the tree limb he'd used to open it, and of course he remembered the chain. But what he remembered most, he told his interrogators, was the strange, haunting, ghostly vision of a schoolyard full of children playing paddleball in the hot summer sun.

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