

## An excerpt from *The Big Empty*

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A frozen wall of fear hit Trace Malloy seconds before the oncoming truck. The grille covering the big diesel engine filled his windshield. The horn blew a pneumatic wail that plied his thoughts reluctantly, coaxing him out of his reverie too late to turn away. His right hand shot out instinctively to steady his coffee in the cup holder as he pulled hard with his left on the wheel. Both were futile gestures.

The impact snapped him forward, then back again, as his pickup seemed to hop off the ground and bounce into the bar ditch beside the road. The seat belt snapped hard against his sternum. He heard the big truck's tires lock up behind him as it skidded to a stop. The sound of rubber grinding on asphalt lingered for a moment. Malloy felt his one hundred-sixty-five-pound frame compress into the unforgiving seat, forcing the last bit of air from his lungs. The pickup was suddenly still.

Coffee burned through the leg of his jeans, and his chest felt as if he'd been hit with a two-by-four. He moved hesitantly and was relieved when his body responded with only dull aches. No shooting pains probably meant nothing was broken. He'd likely saved himself the humiliation of explaining what had just happened to Doc Lambeau.

He cursed himself for not paying attention. Looking through the windshield, already cracked before the collision, he tried to orient himself. He felt like a child caught daydreaming in school, his mind racing to catch up with what he'd missed. The bar ditch rolled out in front of him, a partner to the long black line of asphalt on the left, both pulled taut toward the horizon.

He found himself hoping the pickup would still be drivable. He'd managed to swerve enough that the impact must have been a glancing blow. The fact that he was still conscious, still

in one piece, seemed to prove that. He'd have to explain how he'd busted up a truck on the open road. The embarrassing truth was he'd just been thinking. Not about anything in particular, he was just letting his mind wander. He'd rolled through his days in Kansas — why they were suddenly in his mind so much he didn't know — and about Colt's accident last summer. By the time the truck hit him, his mind had meandered back to its favorite worry — would he and Darla be better off selling out and moving to town or trying to make it through one more year. And if they made it through that one, what about the next one?

His brain had a way of sidestepping when something was bothering him. Instead of obsessing over a problem as some people's do, his mind tried to distract him by conjuring images from the past. Still, as always, there was a common thread to these random thoughts — Colt's injury, the family farm, his days in Kansas, Luke's death. They all led back to the same problem, one that he couldn't solve. That didn't stop his mind from revisiting it, even if he was driving down the road and should have been thinking about work. His mother, who never believed in stewing over intractable concerns, would have scolded him if she'd seen how distracted he'd been. "Make your peace with the Lord, and you don't have to worry," she'd say. He never found it that easy, peace or no peace. Besides, his mother was usually referring to death. These days she didn't speak of it anymore, of course. Not now that it was almost upon her, now that it had, for all practical purposes, already claimed her. For that matter, she didn't speak of much of anything. And if she did, Malloy wasn't around to hear it.

He tugged on the door handle of the pickup and it opened with its usual hesitation. As he stepped out, he could see the crumpled fender. The headlight was gone, and part of the wheel cover had been pressed down into the tire, puncturing it. He cursed again. Changing it wasn't going to be easy in the ditch.

“Are you okay?” The question came from over his shoulder. He turned around and looked up from under the red brim of his cap. Years of grime and dirt had obscured the hat's patch that said “Possum Kingdom Lake.” More than a decade of use had bent the brim of the fishing-trip souvenir into a gentle crescent that cupped his sunglasses. The trip now seemed a lifetime ago, one of the last times he and his brother, Matt, had enjoyed each other's company, pulling up 30-pound catfish from the depths of the lake itself and later plucking small-mouthed bass from the river below the dam.

“I'm fine,” Malloy said.

The other man stood on the roadside, hands at his waist with the palms turned upward, as if he couldn't decide whether to shrug or fight. Either way, Malloy wasn't worried. The man wore jeans and a green shirt with a pale plaid pattern and buttons through the collar points. Underneath, a t-shirt was plainly visible. Both shirts — faded cotton — were tucked neatly into the jeans and secured with a webbed belt. He had on wire-rimmed glasses and his swept-back hair made it look as if he had something stored in his cheeks.

“You swerved right into me,” the man said, his voice rising sharply in the middle of the sentence and falling at the end. “I couldn't stop. I'm driving that big truck; I couldn't turn fast enough. I was afraid it'd flip over.”

“My fault. Sorry,” Malloy said, walking up out of the ditch.

He knew he wasn't supposed to say that. Insurance companies said to never admit wrongdoing. More importantly, he knew company policy forbade it. He glanced back at the damaged fender. If he could pull the metal free of the airless tire, he could probably change the flat and get the truck down to Terry Garrison without having to involve the adjuster that the company inevitably would send out. It seemed pointless to argue over something he knew was

his fault. “You mess up, you fess up,” his mother used to say.

The man stared at him for a moment then went on talking as if he didn't believe Malloy had said anything.

“You were just driving in the middle of the road. I thought you were turning, and as I got closer, you just kept drifting over into my lane. There was nothing I could do.”

“It's okay. I was just turning into this road here,” Malloy said, pointing to the dirt stretch on the other side of the highway that led to a gate on the Main Ranch. “There's usually not much other traffic out here.”

“Well, that's not an excuse...”

“Said I was sorry. Is your truck okay?”

It wasn't his own truck, of course. Malloy could tell just from looking that the man had never driven a truck before in his life. His claim that he couldn't swerve belied his inexperience behind the wheel. The big yellow-and-black markings of the Ryder label clinched the theory.

The truck was idling on the east-bound lane, a few feet from the point of impact. Malloy was no traffic inspector, but he could decipher the tell-tale black skid markings that shot out from the back wheels of the vehicle straight as exclamation marks. The truck hadn't veered from its lane.

The two men walked over to the van's front fender, the big engine rumbling impatiently on the other side of the grille as if annoyed by the inconvenience of the situation. There was a small dent and a couple of scratches, etched white with the paint from the pickup. Malloy had swerved just enough, his instincts asserting themselves over his mental distractions. The pickup, it seemed, had borne the brunt of the impact.

“Oh, man, they're going to charge me for that,” the man moaned, looking at the fender. “I

knew I shouldn't have tried to do this myself."

"Can't imagine they'll even notice that. They probably get more dents backing them into the lot. Where'd you rent it from?"

"San Jose."

"Don't worry about it."

"Well, I guess we need to exchange license and insurance information."

"Yeah, well, there's a problem there."

"What?" The man looked startled.

"I don't have mine."

"Don't have what?"

"My license. Don't have it with me. Guess there'd be an insurance card in the truck."

Malloy walked back down to the ditch.

As he rooted through the glove box, the other man walked around to the front of the pickup and looked at the shattered headlight.

"Looks pretty bad. You've got a flat. And you're going to need a new windshield."

Malloy looked up from under the dash. A crack stretched across the bottom half of the windshield. He chuckled, although the other man couldn't see his smile from under the thick mustache.

"That was there before. Get a lot of rocks thrown up out here. Can't keep windshields. We don't replace 'em until they can't pass inspection anymore."

Malloy slammed the glove box shut.

"Looks like I don't have an insurance card in here either. Have to go back and get it, I guess."

Malloy stepped back out of the truck and closed the driver's side door with the blue-stylized "F" logo of Frye Agricultural Industries Inc. The other man was standing the road, hands on his hips, his posture taking on an impertinence that Malloy instantly found annoying.

"Wait one second," he said. "I'm not about to let you drive off. This was your fault." The man pointed an index finger at him, his brow furrowed in anger and disbelief.

Malloy sighed, looking at the fender biting into the airless tire. Drive off? He glanced at the toes of his boots. The seam that held the uppers to the sole near the toe was fraying. He'd need another pair before midsummer.

"I think we'd better call the police," the man went on.

"Well," Malloy said slowly. "that'd be fine with me but I don't have a way to do that."

"I've got a cell phone --"

"That probably won't work out here," Malloy interrupted. "And there's only one county sheriff and three part-time deputies to patrol nine hundred square miles, so we may be waiting awhile for one to pass by."

The man pressed his lips together so that they almost disappeared from his face. He threw his head back and looked upward as if he were drinking in the vast expanse of the sky, then exhaled. The wind picked up, blowing hard from the west and working against the mousse that tried to keep the hair against his head.

"Where are you turning the truck in? In town? At Garrison's?" Malloy asked finally.

"I, uh, yes. I'm supposed to have it at a place called --" he fumbled in his pockets until he found a wadded-up receipt in his shirt — "Terry's Auto Repair."

Malloy nodded. "That's Terry Garrison. Tell you what. You tell Terry if there's any problem with the truck, he should settle up with me."

“You've got to be kidding. I don't even know your name.”

“Trace Malloy. I've known Terry since we were in diapers. He won't give you any trouble.” Malloy extended a hand, and the man stared at the outstretched palm for a few seconds before taking it limply.

“Well, I guess the least I could do is offer you a ride,” the man said without telling Malloy his name.

“Appreciate it, but I don't need it,” Malloy said. “I'll change the flat, bend the fender out, it'll be fine.”

“Uh, okay, but I still don't know that I should be leaving without exchanging information.”

Malloy had already started to walk back toward the truck. He stopped and turned, and he could feel the impatience welling up from the soles of his feet. He sucked a deep breath through the cover of his mustache and exhaled before he spoke, hoping to dispel any tone of annoyance. The wind pressed hard against his face.

“Look, I know it's probably not how they do things in San Ho-say, but there ain't that many of us out here. Fact is, even if I tried to hide from you, I couldn't. If I owe anything on the truck, just ask anyone in town, and they can tell you how to find me. I work for the ranch, and they'll back up any damages. You have my word.”

“Well,” the other man said slowly, “It just doesn't seem proper. What ranch?”

“*The* ranch,” Malloy said more sharply than he'd intended. “The Conquistador. You know, the one that the whole town's named after.” He stopped short of asking if the man knew where he was. No point in getting off on the wrong foot.

“Oh,” the man said. He hesitated. “Of course. Well, uh, I guess it'll be okay, then. But

still —”

“I gave you my word,” Malloy said bluntly.

“Right. Okay. Well, I guess I'd better get moving.”

Malloy watched the man climb back into the big truck, his long legs fumbling to find the proper footholds. Malloy waited, and the man ground the transmission as if he were determined to remove all the teeth from the gears. The clutch finally engaged, and the van lurched forward, stopped, then shuttered down the road, slowly gaining speed as it made for town.

Malloy watched the yellow square of its back door shrink slowly, heading into the burgeoning heat of the late morning sun. He turned back toward the ditch and looked again at the crumpled mess that had been a left front fender. He'd hoped fixing the pickup would be as easy as he made it sound. The truth was, he didn't want some stranger giving him a lift into town. It'd take months before he'd live that down. As it was, he was likely to be the butt of local jokes for weeks.

The bar ditch was flat and wide, designed to handle sudden runoff from downpours that had become disturbingly rare. It was just broad enough for him to change the tire. The ground wasn't terribly level, but it was sufficient for him to jack the truck up and shimmy the wheel off the studs. As he dislodged the spare and rolled it around to the front of the truck, he thought about what would happen at Garrison's as the man rattled through his explanation. He could see Terry standing there, listening to the story like an old sheep dog, handing the man a receipt without saying a word. Then, Terry would calmly walk down to Sam's barber shop. The ranch office would know the whole painful, embarrassing saga by noon and Darla would be waiting for him at their front door by supertime.

Whoever the man was, he'd be getting a full dose of Conquistador. At the same time,



Malloy knew, Conquistador was going to be getting more than its share of soft-handed men in black-and-yellow rental trucks.

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