

ORION: A NOVEL

by

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CHAPTER 1

He got off the bus, the last passenger on the line, and stood under the drive bay awning, his breath misting in the cold dark. The driver dug his pack out of the hold and went in the sliding doors. At the ticket window he asked about the next bus to Orion.

You want the one that goes to Cheboygan.

I'm not going out that far.

I don't think there is one for Orion.

Are you sure? Can you check?

He waited while the clerk dialed and asked his manager.

Hold on. Yeah. They cut the line two years ago after a bus got robbed. If you want, you can take the One-twelve to the Levering Road stop.

Is that as close as it gets?.

The clerk asked into the phone, waited. Yup, he said.

He went back out through the working side of the front sliding doors. Too far, too cold to walk. Too late to hitch, too dangerous. He dug his heavy coat out of his pack and lit a cigarette. The wind tore the smoke away. He'd nearly forgotten how cold it got so early. It was about time for the first snows, light little powder dusts, five or ten minutes tops. Then a week in the wind would pick up, worse near the river, and the dusts would be drifts, drifts blizzards. Plus his shoulder, all those miles in the cold. It wouldn't take the weight of the pack that distance. He could call Mattie, say hi mom, tell her he's home, come pick him up but when he called from the airport that cough hadn't sounded right.

He called a cab from a pay phone and the dispatcher told him it would take thirty, forty minutes. Hang tight.

He hung up and waited inside where the heat blew rattling out of the vents. Sleepy looking

people slumped on the benches with arms over their bags. One old lady sat stiff and straight holding her purse on her lap, one of her gloves on the floor by her boot. He pointed down and she looked from his finger to the floor and snatched the glove without a thank you.

You're welcome, he said.

She pretended not to hear.

About an hour later a green taxi with white lettering pulled up in front. He went out and tried the back doors but they were locked. The driver cracked the passenger window.

You going to Orion? asked the driver. No shit?

How much?

The driver punched something in on the digital meter. Fifty, he said.

I got twenty-five.

Then you can go twenty-five.

How far is twenty-five?

About to where East VFW meets North Straits.

All right.

Show me.

What?

Show me.

He took out the bills from his wallet and pushed them against the window.

The driver and unlocked the doors.

He got in and shoved his pack over on the seat beside him.

Look, sorry, said the driver while he started scribbling on a clipboard. Not a lot of Orion fares.

Got bad?

Been bad. You from there?

Born and raised.

One of our guys got shot there last year right around this time. Some guy flagged him and when he pulled over this guy just pops him, bang, right on the street. Never caught the guy. What's your name?

Gene.

Gene what?

Gene Temmens. You want to see ID or some shit?

Easy, chill. The driver wrote it down, stowed the clipboard and pulled onto highway. He said, You a soldier?

Was.

Came back on time. Tonight's the night. The first snow of the year.

The driver tapped the windshield, pointing. The first few flakes wobbled down out of the dark, flashing in the headlight beams.

The cab dropped him at the intersection of East VFW and North Straits in the pitch dark. He shouldered the pack and headed east across the ditch and into the fields bordering the road. Brittle grass and weeds crunched underfoot, brushed against his pants legs. Trees bare or close to it, holding on to a few twisted leaves scratching against each other. Some of the wind cut through his coat. Already he could smell the far-off stink of the river.

After four years in Iraq, he'd remembered Orion and all of Michigan as one long winter, hard and sharp, like a season of knives. Summers were brief flashes of fishing at the shore and hunting the old Ojibwa trails that wound through the tip of the peninsula, hot days and humid nights. Ass-crack hot, Rich called them. Like the sweat that makes it past the elastic band. But mostly he remembered the winter hunts, chopping firewood, bundling up and salting the drive and shoveling out the walk three

or four times a week.

An hour in he recognized the potholes, the crooked street signs, the dropping traffic lights blinking yellow in the dark. On the corner of Fifth Jim's was closed. A guy was passed out in the alley beside it, his coat dusted with snow. Gene nudged him with the tip of his boot and the guy blinked an eye and looked up at him, breathing coarse.

Jim still run it?

The guy smacked his lips and said, What time is it?

It's snowing.

So it is.

He cupped a hand to the windows and saw the outlines of the bar stools upended on the bar, the pinball machine, the booths in the back. One light still on above the pool table, chipped stain glass in the shade. He turned back to the guy but he'd passed out again, snowflakes snagged in his beard.

Near River Road he cut north to kick through the gravel lot where he and Rich had used to played baseball every spring, football in the fall. Some of the working corner streetlights threw enough light for him to see the diamond. Big flat pieces of slate for first and second, a misshapen rock for third. The pitcher's mound was a hill of gravel bowled in the middle, the batter's box cut out of the dirt and weeds near the fence line, the boards behind it smashed and dented. All of it gray and flecked dark with snow. He parked it on third, his old position, and took another smoke break. Halfway through three kids slid under the fence and crossed the lot joking and laughing and kicking at the gravel. There was unlimited joy in the feel of gravel dug up and flung on the tip of a shoe. He craved it. Craved the pain of the pebble that would make it into his shoe and jab between his toes the whole way back. Rich had called them lot blisters. Hollis called them shoe ticks. He'd called them something else he didn't even remember.

He heard the slosh of a bottle in the dark, then the pop of shattered glass, the tinny screech of a

ring tone. Then they were gone on the other side of the fence under the for sale sign that had been fading when he was a kid. The phone number hadn't changed in twenty years. Neither had the lot.

He flicked his cigarette butt toward second and slipped out onto the south side of Dewey. A block down what was left of burnt-down row homes lined the walk. They were caged in rusting chain link, faded yellow police tape snagged in the trees. The sagging barbed wire on top had been cut and peeled back and the ground inside the fence was littered with soiled newspapers, empty plastic bottles, blackened mattresses. A fire burned in a vacant window, five or six people huddled around it.

Fuck you looking at? someone called.

No one answered.

At the corner of of Fenn and Main three police cruisers jutted half on the sidewalk. Inside a rough circle of yellow tape two paramedics were loading a body onto a gurney while the cops talked. Broken glass on the pavement dotted with blood. No crowd, no one watching except faces in the windows from the apartments over the corner building.

All down his street someone had knocked over the garbage cans. Thick dents in the side, trash blowing from the ripped plastic bags. It was cheap sport. All it took was a baseball bat or a heavy stick, there wasn't a broke-ass Orion kid who couldn't dig up a tree branch somewhere, and someone driving, someone watching for cops. Mailboxes were fair game too but by the time he'd hit sixteen most people had moved theirs further up the drive. For sale signs were game and half the ones on the block had taken a hit. Mattie had told him about the neighbors folding up and moving away, how the banks were getting stingier and stingier. Mitch Donaldson's property abutted his and now there wasn't even a truck in the drive. The wood fence had collapses, the railing sticking out of the mud. The realty company signs on the Forsyths, the Millers, and the Creebs, like a domino chain down the block. They'd all been automotive workers, most two generations, and they'd started sinking when the wind

sagged in Detroit's sails. A matter of time, his father used to say, and he'd been right. He'd been right about the war economy too. The Temmens were all that was left, three generations of soldier. Killing paid.

Halfway up the hill to his property he heard a noise and turned back. A pack of dogs was nosing through the toppled trash cans across the street, notched ears pinned back, scraggly tails looped. He whistled and they froze, heads up. The thick gray mutt in front whined and pricked its ears.

Hey, he called.

The gray barked.

From this distance the gray's eyes looked large, glossy and black in the street light. He took his hands out of his pockets and slid the pack off his shoulders. Then the gray let out a high-pitched bark and the pack darted away, tails down. One dog, two, they'd turn up every now and then in town, in the woods or near the river or in the abandoned lots. Lying on their sides with their eyes bulging and their sides cut to ribbons where they'd been dragged. Sometimes the length of bloody chain coiled in the grass beside them. At school every kid knew that if your dog ran away in Orion it was good as dead. You'd stumble on it one day and its guts would be trailing it pink and brown and swarmed with flies. Or you'd be walking by the river and see it belly up in the water or laying on the shore stinking in the sun.

So the moral was don't have a dog. Or if you have one, don't let it go. And don't ever get caught buying lengths of chain.

He stopped at the edge of the tree line and stared down the drive. Either Mattie was out or the truck had been stolen. The house windows were dark but the porch light was on.

He unlocked the door and went in, trying to be quiet. He left his pack in the hall and went into the kitchen, hands out while his eyes adjusted. The light over the stove was on. The calendar on the

fridge had the days until he was supposed to come home crossed out in thick blue lines. November first, two thousand and six. the card on the table read Welcome Home, Gene! A covered cake beside it. Coffee on the stove. He poured a cup and sat down at the kitchen table and drank it lukewarm, black. The house creaking as it settled.

He found Mattie in the living room, asleep on the sofa with heavy blankets piled on top, the fireplace unlit. She'd told him to wake her if he got in late but fuck it. He smoothed the blanket over her and tried to figure out which lines around her eyes and face were new, which he remembered. She'd stopped dying her hair and the gray showed through bright at the roots. He checked his watch. Three forty-two. Let her sleep.

He got a cup from the kitchen and settled in the recliner by the window. He unlaced his boots and stretched his legs and lit a cigarette, tapping the ashes in the cup. The end of his cigarette glowed. The smoke twisted off the cherry, wispy blue. He hooked a finger under the curtain and looked out.

Already the ground was dusted. By morning it would be blanketed.

He was in the kitchen heating the coffee when he heard her call his name.

Gene?

He went to the door. She threw the covers off her and looked at him, tears in her eyes. Then she frowned and burst into tears and pickled herself up and motioned for him to get his ass over there.

Hi, mom.

Come here, my boy. My Gene.

His arms went around her with room to spare. She was too thin. Older. He buried his face in her robe and heard the wheeze through her ribs. Her hands shook in his hair.

Oh God, she said.

Hi, mom.

My boy, she said. My boy, my baby, my Gene.

CHAPTER 2

While she made breakfast he went upstairs and paused outside his brother's door. Rich's smells lingered, shoe polish and shirt starch and his dandruff shampoo. Something else threaded in. Something bitter like burnt skin or blood pooled in hot concrete.

Gene? Mattie called from downstairs. How do you want your coffee?

Black.

Black?

Yeah.

His room was both the same and different. The same dark blue bedspread, the same navy heavy blankets and sheets. The same volumes of maps, tracking guides, and history on the bookshelves—the old obsessions passed from Rich to him. But the mess he'd left was gone, the scraps of paper on the desk, the dust on the sill, the open closet door with his boots and clothes spilling out. Everything was neat now. Everything had a place.

He set his pack on the desk and unpacked. Two five five-six cartridge casings, a necklace made of human hair. Discharge paperwork, two letters from Hollis telling him to look him up when he got back, he had a job waiting for him. He scanned them again and dropped them in the trash can. An old leather wallet with the lining falling out, his digital camera with the broken lens. The battery was half dead, the memory card full. He dumped the card in the desk drawer and dropped the camera back in the bag. The clothes he bunched up and stuffed in the closet, clicked the light on and off. The window screeched in the frame when he opened and closed it. Paint was peeling on the outside sill.

He sat down on the bed. From downstairs he heard the sounds of Mattie whisking eggs,

clinking bowls. Hot butter smells, fresh coffee. He could smell Rich but not himself.

The toaster sounded. She called his name.

He left his boots wedged under the door and went downstairs.

Did you sleep on the flight? she asked.

A little. I'm six kinds of jet-lagged. Did you know that the buses don't come out here anymore?

She rolled her eyes and said, id you know the cabs jacked up their rates to make up for it? And the buses in town cut half their routes. It's ridiculous.

She set their plates on the kitchen table and poured the coffee.

There was some still in the pot.

It's old. I made fresh. How far did you walk from?

Levering.

In the cold? Christ, Gene why didn't you call me?

It was beyond late.

It's a winter cold, same I get every year like clockwork. I'm not dying.

Tell you what. If anything it's gotten uglier. I can't believe the street.

I know. The Buck's sold for three-quarters what they paid and they moved here about the same time we did. Can you imagine? And did you see they shut down West Mills?

The whole goddamn school?

On the plus side, she said. You look good. Very desert tan. But what about your arm?

It's not pretty.

Let me see.

He pulled down his collar and she leaned across the table and sucked in a breath between her teeth.

It looks like it hurts, she said. It's so red.

He prodded the pinched skin around the scar and said, It's not that bad. They can take a long time to heal.

You take it easy. You rest, catch yourself up.

Forget me. Why are you so thin? And you stopped dyeing your hair.

I have a figure. And I don't go to Charlene's anymore. There was a fiasco with color the last time and that's all I'm going to say.

Stop it. Look at your wrists. And that cough.

She waved it off with the knife and buttered her toast in quick scratches. Her knuckles like stones in stretched cloth.

Humor me, he said. What happened to the truck?

She shrugged and said, Stopped running. Something with the transmission. It was too expensive to fix. I'm just waiting to get another.

How are you getting to work?

I have some time off. My son is back and I wanted the time. It's not a big deal. The truck's not a big deal. Aren't you glad to be home?

I'm glad.

Then smile, at least once.

How's this?

When did you start smoking?

Two three years ago. Was good after a firefight.

She turned the pack on the table to look at the label and gave it a flick.

That was Rich's favorite, she said.

How is he?

She shrugged and said, The same. Quieter.

He hasn't tried it again?

No. God, no.

That's good.

I go about four days a week. You should quit, by the way.

Someday.

They'll kill you.

A lot of things will kill you.

Like sassing your mother.

Like getting shot at.

Like too much sun. Look at you.

That's about over. So, the Donaldson's are gone. The Millers, the Forsyths. Who else? What about the Madisons?

She chewed, nodding, and said, They moved about two years ago. Who's left? Christ, the Foresters took off. The Conways lost their house and David had his shop closed. The Mills, Maloneys, Gertens, I think, and what was that kid you hung out with when you were little—Callahan something?

Fucking Donny Callahan. Didn't his dad work with you at the supermarket?

Bryce, yeah, when you were little. That was right before Rich started at East High. I talked to Bryce a month ago, actually. They moved to Pennsylvania.

Who's left?

She looked at her hands, all the fingers counted. I don't know, she said. Once the factories started closing I think most of them moved.

Have you talked to Dad?

She wiped the crumbs from the corners of her mouth and shook her head. She said, Why do

you even ask?

Is he still in Cheboygan?

I could care less. As far as I know. You want more? You still hungry?

He pushed his plate back and refilled his coffee at the stove.

By the way, she said. Mister. You were not in uniform last night.

Very observant.

Can I ask why?

Not really.

Was it that bad?

I just don't want to talk about it, he said sitting back down. He said, I just want to put some distance between all that shit and me. I recall there being a cake involved in all this.

Ah, she said. She popped the last piece of egg in her mouth and got halfway through it before a coughing fit interrupted her. When the fit cleared she blinked back tears and swallowed and put a hand to her chest.

That's you clockwork cold?

You want to eat the cake or wear it?

I missed you.

I missed you too.

While she cut the cake he tore his napkin into strips and began folding them into teepee cones, some bigger, some smaller. They threw tiny shadows over crumbs and coffee rings. He nudged them in a circle, then a spiral, the largest on the outside, the smallest within.

She came back with two slices of cake. His frosting said Home, hers said Gene. He picked at the icing while she refilled their cups.

Does it feel strange being home? she asked.

Big time. Is it strange having someone in the house again?

Good strange. It's early but have you thought about what you're going to do?

A little. Get a job sooner or later. Hopefully sooner if there's jobs to be gotten.

River pirate. That's always an option. But you don't have to stay in with me, you know. I'm boring. I just watch TV or putz around the house. I need a hobby. Want to learn how to do needlepoint?

Want me to take you shooting?

My eyes aren't what they used to be.

You got a birthday coming up soon, spring chicken. What do you want?

Arthritis.

He pressed the paper village flat with his hand, smoothed them out. Tents became just paper again, wrinkled strips with cake crumbs on them. He swallowed his coffee, grinds and all and went to the stove for more.

Sold, he said.

He poured his cup and turned to her. She was facing away, the cake balanced on her fork, looking out the kitchen window where he could see the snow falling in the gray.

Are Rich's things in his room? he asked.

She took a bite and chewed it slowly, thoughtfully.

Some, she said. The rest is in the attic.

He stood at the stove sipping coffee. The things he wanted would be in the attic. The things she hadn't wanted to see since he'd gone to the institution. Those things belonged to troubled Rich, adult Rich who'd been thrown out, gone to jail, gone crazy. He knew without looking what he'd find in the room. Child Rich, his clothes, his books. Rich before he'd gone off.

You want more coffee? he asked.

She shook her head. She said, No.

After dinner he went up to the attic to dig out his winter hat, boots, and gloves. He found them in a dusty, open box marked Gene. Next to it were boxes marked Rich, seven in all. They were taped closed and the dust sheets had fallen off. Behind them the rifle bag in the corner beside the window.

He wiped the dust from the bag and unzipped it and breathed in the smells of gun oil and steel, brass and wood. Rich's A-Bolt, still assembled. Sixty degree action on the bolt, satin finish Walnut with the raised cheekpiece, hinged floorplate, and a simple field scope on top. A beautiful, simple rifle, clean lines, blued steel finish, so light in his hands. He turned it over and levered the bolt to check the chamber. Empty.

Not a fancy rifle, Dad told Rich when he gave it to Rich on his fifteenth birthday, but it's reliable and solid, and that's all he could ask from a gun. Nothing fancy, as far as Dad was concerned. He hated the hunters who used tree nests, scent sprays, musk, ACOG scopes, all that bullshit. The hunt was a simple thing according to their father. The more added to it the more you fucked it up.

Life by subtraction. Constant reduction. Dad had been so good at that except when he opened his mouth. Then he wondered why Gene grew up barely talking. No goddamn point in getting a word in if it ended up buried in the end. Unless that's what Dad wanted, a silent son to make up for noisy Rich and Mattie. It was possible knowing him. Almost anything was.

He put the rifle away and went down with his gear and showered and changed. When he came down she was watching television on the sofa with blankets piled around her, the sound low. On the screen a pair of soldiers in desert fatigues were talking to a reporter. The sun a white dot in their sunglasses lenses, their faces streaked with dirt.

Are you going out?

Jim's for a beer. Want to come?

No, it's freezing. You need money? Here.

Stop.

Don't argue with me, please. I'm old.

He took the ten and stuffed it in his pocket.

What did you tell them when a reporter stuck a mic in your face? she asked motioning to the screen.

I don't know, he said and kissed her good night. No one ever asked.

CHAPTER 3

The snow held, light and steady. The cold sharpened. Or maybe it was him, four years in a desert, sun, sun, sun and no water. There'd been a drought in Anbar two years running, wells dry, people dying by the side of the road, dying in their mudbrick homes. Some of the villages didn't even have wells. They relied on irrigation and all a warlord had to do was control the water to control everything. A plastic bottle of the clear stuff was worth more than an iPod or a magazine of seven six-tows. Kids had run behind the tanks for miles huffing in the dust and sometimes they fell and lay there, specks in the distance, black in the sun. Hollis sold the bottles for something close to twenty dollars American a pop. Iraqis came with armfuls of shit where it was bad, begging in broken English. CD players and scarves, blankets, a mule. One old man dropped three of his teeth in Gene's palm and put a hand to his bony chest. The sound those teeth made dropping in the dust like piff piff piff. That was burned in for good.

The trees broke a hundred yards from Main along the bank of the river and sloped down and west toward the river. The few times it had rained they'd collected it in buckets and barrels, sheets stretched over boards, makeshift funnels held up to gutter spouts filling big plastic jugs. He'd expected

it to taste good and clean but it didn't. It tasted oily and smoky. A hint of sulfur. He'd spit it out and Hollis had laughed at him and asked what'd he expect? Water from a stone?

He squeezed into Jim's and the music and heat hit him like a brick. Jim was tending bar and barking at some girl behind him. Nate was feeding dollars into the jukebox and mashing buttons. He didn't see any other faces he remembered.

Anything to drink in this shithole? Gene asked as he stepped up to the bar.

Jim looked at him and grinned and said, Holy shit.

I guess that's no.

Holy shit, said Jim. Nate, come here! Holy shit! How the hell are you? Jesus H. Christ, when did you get back?

Yesterday.

Motherfucker, Temmens, said Nate.

Watch the shoulder.

Shit, sorry Alice Anne. You look half dead.

Fuck you, you're buying.

I'm buying, said Nate. Orion soldier comes home, I'm buying his drink.

Fuck you both, I'm buying, said Jim.

Jim poured three shots of whiskey and a set a glass of beer in front of Gene and Nate.

To coming home, said Jim.

They knocked back their whiskeys and slapped the bar and Jim poured another round.

Hey, said Nate. What the fuck? You never came home on rotation?

Traveled.

You got to be kidding me. You spent your rotation traveling?

A little. Then I picked up another shift at a prison.

They let you do that? Don't they make soldiers go home or some shit?

I had connections, said Gene, smiling.

Connections, said Nate. He shook his head and shoved Gene. Get the fuck out of here. I got your connection right here, he said grabbing his crotch. Kept it warm for you.

Put it away, said Jim. There's no little kids around.

Jesus Christ, said Gene.

Jesus H. Christ in a bucket, said Nate. He raised his glass. Welcome home, Temmens.

Welcome back, Gene, said Jim.

They clinked glasses and drank and Gene half choked he was laughing so hard.

What's so funny? asked Nate.

He shrugged and spun the shot glass around the whiskey ring. He hadn't noticed how long he'd gone without one of those hard belly laughs until then—one year, two? At least a few months before he got shot. Before Hollis got shot. He spun the glass again and hooked a boot heel on the floor bar.

How you like being back?

Ugh.

I know, said Nate. You got a fondness for shit holes if you came back to Orion.

We'll see how long I stay.

There's everywhere but here.

Jim said, Third Armored, for four straight years. That must have been something.

At times.

Was it you guys or someone else did Falluja?

That was 82nd Airborne and the Marines. We did Tal Afar.

Clusterfuck.

Amen.

He threw back another shot and chased it with half the beer. Already the warmth was slipping into his arms and legs, his face. Loose and good, slippery like a mongoose. The ache fell off his bones, his shoulder. All that cold outside was far away.

Shoot some pool, said Nate. He threw a five on the bar and dropped a handful of quarters in Gene's hand and said, Go pick some shooting music.

Gene ambled over and fed the machine and flipped and flipped. Something loud, ballsy. He punched up Pantera and slapped the glass to the drum beat. Then he fed it the rest of the quarters and put the song on repeat.

Jim called him over after the first game and said he wanted Gene to meet someone. Jim waved at the bar girl. She was wearing jeans and a tight black sweater and frowned playfully as she came over with a towel in hand.

This is Laura, said Jim. Laura, this is Gene.

Hi, she said, shaking Gene's hand.

Howdy.

What?

Howdy, Gene shouted. I'm Gene.

I know. We're still shaking.

Jim leaned in and shouted, Gene just got back from Iraq. I know his folks.

Welcome home, she said.

Are you single? Gene shouted.

What?

Are you single?

Are you drunk?

Maybe.

Maybe what?

Maybe a little.

Did you maybe put Pantera on repeat?

Wasn't my money. I'm going to go play pool and get fucked up and maybe I'll see you later and we can talk about it?

She started popping beer tops and digging glasses into ice wells. She said, I hope you're not driving.

Okay then.

When he got back to the table Nate handed him his phone. There was a text from Hollis saying he'd heard Gene was back, welcome home. Call him in the AM.

You call him?

Nate nodded and pointed with his stick and said, Your break.

Why'd you call him?

What you mean?

Nothing.

He's working tonight or he'd come by.

What's Lerne doing these days?

Works at Brewster's kind of.

Kind of?

He's got shit going on. Got me a job.

You work for Hollis.

Half the town does.

Gene broke and dropped a yellow striped nine. The cue ball rolled with it to the corner pocket

edge and brushed the rubber bumper.

Where's Mikey and Bill?

Nate chalked his stick and said, They're dead. Roadside bomb outside Baghdad two years ago.

Oh, Christ, Nate. I'm sorry.

Nate waved it away. Then he said, You'd have known if you'd come home on rotation.

He shot and banked a red striped eleven into the side pocket and stepped back.

Your shot.

You made one, said Nate.

Didn't call it.

They played three games and half a fourth before Gene forfeited because he couldn't shoot straight. Laura had gone home and the jukebox was turned low. They sat at the bar, barely anyone left in the place, and Nate told him about who was left, who had died, who had never come back. The Miller twins, Hank Rodding, that Korean kid, Pham what's his face, Jude, Roger, Randy, Albert, Dave Higgins—Bobby Lowe from West Mill, Bobby Hill, too, Barry, Dan, Louis, Andy, all those fucking kids, gone. 8th Infantry, Army Rangers, Navy, Air Force, on and on. The ones that didn't had left to Cheboygan or South to Detroit or else they'd just plain left and never looked back. That was the smart move. Get away from the UP, the winters that took the skin off your face, the summer with mosquito swarms. All the broke-ass, no job living. The ones that came back, though, they took jobs in the factories or waited tables or tried to get in at Brewster's down by the river. The only reason he hadn't gone into the service, Nate told him, was because he couldn't on account of his migraines, some bullshit percent chance he'd keel over in the middle of a firefight.

Hollis kind of owns Brewster's, Nate said. Kind of sort of. Half at least.

You work there?

Not there. For him.

Doing what?

What needs doing?

Sounds like shady shit.

What's left? It's shady or minimum wage if you can even get that.

You're telling me there's no jobs left in town?

Nate took a long pull on his beer and said, It's just me and my mom now that Mikey and Bill's gone, same as you. I got to take care of her. And Hollis pays. Rock bottom, that simple. Hollis pays. Pays good.

They were quiet for a while, smoking their cigarettes down to the filter before Nate slapped him on the back and got up and came back with two new packs of Red.

So what do you do? said Gene.

Nate unwrapped the pack and crumpled the cellophane in his fist. He smiled and jabbed a finger at one of his dollars on the bar and slid it around.

He's into that shit?

Whatever is fair game, said Nate. He says do this, I do it. Go there, I go. Someone don't pay on time, I have a talk with them. They don't like talking to me, they get to talk to Ferguson or Llewellyn. They're not as nice guys.

They work at the shop?

Partly. He told me a little about what you all had over in Iraq.

That shit's shut down.

Not what he said.

He don't know.

Nate shrugged and lit a cigarette. Gene slid one out of his pack and snatched his lighter and

said, Besides. That's between me and Lerne.

Say no more. He's got work for you. Smart move to take him up on it.

Sports were over. The news was on, footage of the desert. Soldiers in fatigues trailing tanks, dust clouds rising. Two Iraqis looked into the camera and a translator talked over them. Beside them a little boy with a scar on his upper lip. Then a cut to MPs walking a concrete corridor, bulbs burning overhead.

Jesus Christ, if I see one more fucking thing on Abu Graib. Change it, Jim? Thanks.

Jim aimed the remote and the channel jumped. Brokers in shirtsleeves rolled up. Bank exteriors and managers looking busy. Bad times for banks on the way, a reporter was saying. A bank manager was shaking his head, shrugging his shoulders.

Then Nate asked, You seen Rich yet?

Tomorrow.

How about your pop?

Fuck him, said Gene. Fuck him.

So, what's next?

Not sure. Maybe job. Maybe get out of dodge. I think shit's bad.

Like with money?

I don't know. Something's off. Reminds me, you see the dogs yet? There's a pack of goddamn dogs downtown. Saw them on my block last night.

State of things. Makes sense seeing as how there's no jobs.

How is John staying open? Where my mom works.

Nate tapped his ashes and said, They're not. Didn't she tell you?

He smacked his mouth to get the cottony dryness out and finished off his beer and rubbed the grit out of the corner of his eyes. He said, When did they close?

About a year ago. I think it was a year.

I don't know.

You know what happened to the truck by any chance?

Your dad's old pickup?

Yeah.

They were quiet again. Finally Nate said, I bought it.

Gene stared at him. He took a long, deep drag on his cigarette and caught the burnt taste of filter and crushed it out in the ashtray.

How much?

Gene, Nate began.

How fucking much?

Nate licked his lips and said, Four hundred.

The fuck? Four hundred dollars?

Gene, it was twelve years old, it was all I could afford, come on.

He laid his hands flat on the bar and jerked his neck to the left until it cracked.

Gene.

Four fucking hundred, Nate? Didn't you just say Hollis paid good?

It was before I got the job.

My mom. You know her and you gave her four hundred.

Look.

No, he said. He threw up his hands and picked up his cigarettes and keys, put his coat on. He said, This was over there I'd bust your fucking head open.

Gene, come on.

He grabbed him by the throat and nearly jerked him off the stool and said, You motherfucker, I'd

snap your neck, four hundred fucking dollars. Fuck you, Nate.

Gene, said Jim.

He let go. White hand prints in Nate's skin. Nate scooted back and opened his mouth but Jim told him to shut it and for Gene to go home. It wasn't worth doing a night in lockup.

He went out. The truck was in the back lot between another pickup and the dumpster. Same beat-up baby blue paint job, same rusting drivers side wheel rim. He ran a hand along the freezing metal bed wall and patted the hood. Then he picked up a rock and whipped it at the passenger window. The glass spider-web cracked with a sharp pop.

When he got home the house was dark, quiet. The heat low, the rooms chilly. He eased the ladder down and went up into the attic. The oil and cleaning rods were still inside the gun bag. Ammunition too. The shine on the barrel glowed when he finished, the stock shone. He sat in the dust and sighted through the window. Between the crosshairs snow blew past on the wind. Orion beyond the trees, barely lit against the dark. No face, no facade. Orion was buried within. Something he'd never left behind.

He heard her bedroom door open and shuffling steps to the ladder.

Gene?

Yeah, he said. He held the rifle against his chest and waited.

After a while she sniffed and said, I had a dream. Someone was downstairs but when I came down to look it wasn't you.

Who was it?

Someone I didn't recognize. Did you have a nice time?

Jim says hi.

She was quiet again. Then she said, Are you all right?

Tired. A little drunk. Go back to sleep, I'll see you in the morning.

I love you.

I love you too.

He waited for her door to close, the creak of her bed. Three o'clock. Four. His breath misted in the cold and he shivered against the beams. His great-grandfather had done it with a pump action shotgun and finding the mess drove his great-grandmother insane. His uncle did it on the river. Stole a boat and put down a six pack before he'd let go and slipped over the side. Then a quick breath in, a surge of panic, then warmth on and on, he imagined. Or maybe endless panic, endless cold, the river pulling you under and twisting you around and around. His brother had tried it with pills. Twice. And he'd called him a coward at the time and said if he was going to do it why not make sure. Since when did Temmenses fuck a thing like that up?

He put the rifle away and went downstairs to bed, the smell of gun oil still on his fingers.

CHAPTER 4

She served the eggs and bacon and poured the coffee and went back for the toast. He blew on his coffee. She nudged the cream carton. He shook his head.

Since when?

A while.

Black coffee, cigarettes. You know who that reminds me of?

Dont. Jim told me that John closed up. Where are you working?

Gene, please, she said. She dropped two slices of toast on his plate and took the ones most burnt. She said, It's breakfast. Just eat. I told you things are fine.

Nate bought the truck. Barely paid anything for it, too, the asshole. And John's closed.

She put her fork down and covered her face. For a long while she remained that way, silent.

Then she sighed and picked up fork and cut a wedge of eggs.

I was going to find out sooner or later.

I'd hoped later. It can wait.

Depends on how bad things are.

You just got back. I wanted things to look normal for you. I haven't seen you in *four years*.

What's wrong with a little time with my son? You shouldn't have to come home to this mess.

How bad?

She chewed looking out the kitchen window. The snow had stopped, the ground speckled white.

I was laid off about five months ago, she said. John took cuts on his own salary until he was making what we made just to keep us there.

How have you been paying the mortgage? he asked.

She shook her head, staring at her plate. She said, I haven't. I sold the truck to make the last payment.

He only gave you four hundred.

I asked for eight.

Son of a bitch.

It's just him and his mom. They don't have much.

You don't know that. He's working for Hollis. And that asshole could have done something.

No one knew. I didn't say anything. I did what I had to, I looked for work, there is none. I kept my mouth shut. You were coming home. That was it, that was all I cared about. We could figure the rest out later.

His stomach dropped into his knees. He thought about the stash he'd built up over there,

envelopes full of money, gold, gems. Sixty or seventy thousand give or take ten plus debt owed to him by other platoons, a grand out in loans to Tiger Squad, two to Fox. Then there was the drugs, speed, coc, weed, meth, all the downers and uppers he helped circulate—big boom in those post Falluja. Post any big offensive. The commission on that alone was enough to float a mortgage payment every month. And then there was what they took off the bodies, diamonds, gold teeth. How much had he hoarded compared to the two-fifty he sent home every month? How far had he buried them?

He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup for the warmth and said, Do you have all the paperwork?

She nodded in time to her chewing, one foot tapping the leg of the table.

She dumped the files on the table, boxes full. Letters spilling out of envelopes, notices and requests, endless bills and carbons. He sifted through and started separating them by date. Dear Mr. or Mrs. Temmens, numbers climbing every month. The dates shrunk. There was debt going back to before he'd left for Iraq in 2002, back to when Rich had been in the service circa 1990.

She brewed another pot of coffee and poured their cups. The cough doubled her at the stove for a minute and when she came back with the pot she was red faced.

Dad was hemorrhaging money, he said. For years. He stiffed you with a lot of this. You could nail his ass in court for this.

And get what? All he's got is his pension. And how would I afford the lawyer?

What about what I was sending home?

You sent what you could.

He didn't say anything.

She said, With my job plus that, sure.

There's a second mortgage here.

I took that out three or four years ago. I needed the money.

Why didn't you say anything?

What was I going to say? You were in Iraq, your brother's in an institution. Your father could care less. I was working, my job covered it. I'd be fine if John hadn't closed.

He looked from her to the table. Ten, twenty years of paper trail. Some of it went back further. There were old photographs mixed in, an envelope of them. The apartment where Rich was born. Them moving into the house, bringing Gene home. Rich as child, looking over his brother's crib while Gene's tiny hands reached up toward a mobile of blue plastic stars. He and Rich as kids wearing cowboy hats and pajamas, holding toy rifles, standing in piles of wrapping paper. Dad behind them, a hand on each shoulder. On the back it read December twenty-fifth, nineteen eighty-four. He put it away and tossed the envelope back in the pile. Circles on circles, the shape of his whole life. Or spirals, more like, from the outside in, tighter and tighter until it crushed, smothered. He dug out the mortgage papers and spread them out on the table.

How much is left on this?

Thirty, she said. Three months behind.

Three months? That's it?

Three months is the contract limit. And with the market right now and the way things are, they won't extend.

Not even another month?

Not even another month. Not in Orion. John said he thought it was a sign. Two or three years and it will get worse.

How much worse could it get?

He flipped through an assessment. Eight years ago, the land, the house: a hundred and thirty grand, easy. Double that now if it was anywhere else but Orion. He opened an envelope addressed to

Mattie Temmens from the mortgage company dated three weeks earlier and read the letter. Then he read it again just to make sure and folded it up and put it back and pinched at the knot of pain behind the bridge of his nose.

Does Dad know about this?

She shrugged.

Well, why didn't you tell him? Get him on the phone and tell him look, you son of a bitch, I'm about to lose my house, I got one of our sons in a loony bin, the other just got back from hell.

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. He knew as well as she did that Dad wouldn't lift a finger to help them. First he'd cut off Rich, then Mattie. Gene was the only one he hadn't cut off so Gene had done it for him over the phone from Iraq beginning with look, asshole, and ending with fuck you.

I'll call him, he said.

Don't.

He's got money.

She shook her head and dropped her napkin on her empty plate and started clearing the table.

He took a pen from the cup on the counter and started making a tally while she cleaned up. The mortgage, food, electric, gas, all weighed against his disability, whatever they could scrape together—Rich's social security covered his hospitalization—that left what? How much per month?

We can't make it, he said. At least I don't think so.

We can always get an apartment, Gene.

Why not just leave Orion? Why don't we pack up, snag Rich, and just go.

It takes time to get him transferred to another facility. And if it's not in Michigan, we have to apply for State aid.

I already said we'd snag him. We can take care of him at home.

She gave him a soft, sad look and said, There's a court order. He can't come home.

Since when? Says who?

The State. Since the second time he tried to kill himself.

Second time. Pills and then what?

Liquid morphine.

Jesus Christ, this family. What the fuck is wrong with us? Then we move. We can always visit him.

I'm not leaving him.

Can we be realistic here for a second? If we get an apartment there's no guarantee we can cover it. You're not working and I don't know what I can get, how much it will pay.

Gene, she snapped. I'm not leaving your brother. I am *not* going to be that person.

He watched her cleaning the dishes at the sink, her back to him, the set of her shoulders. Not *that* person, like a brick to the face. A line of heat went up his spine. The coffee bubbled in his stomach. He collected the paperwork he'd need, the mortgage, the bank notices, the debt letters and put them off to the side and stood up to dig his cigarettes out of his pocket.

I'll call them tomorrow morning, he said.

She didn't say anything. The clink of dishes, the swish of the tap. Silverware clattering together.

Leave this here, he said. I'll sort it when I come back in.

Outside he went to the wood shed and opened the door. Empty. Cobwebs bellowing in the wind, spider-less. The pile on the back porch rotted gray. He went down to the cellar. The axe was hanging on the wall, the adze and the wedge beside it. A line of rust along the lip of the blade.

He sat down at the workbench and looked up into the shaft of gray light coming from the open door. Sixty or seventy, gone. The Army had it or Donaldson had it or someone else he'd trusted. The

mistake had been getting into it in the first place. Easy money Hollis had told him. Easy. Every army has needs that it doesn't provide for. And in Anbar with no oversight, their C.O. days away at best, they roamed the desert like kings and took tribute. Scratch that. Hollis was the king, the squad his knights. And when Hollis took one in the ass, one in the leg, and shipped off home after a hospital stay, Gene moved up to squad leader, took up crown and scepter. Martin and Sanchez his knights. Taking a higher and higher cut. But it didn't last. Nothing did. Because first he'd gotten shot. Then he'd gotten caught.

He found the whetstone wrapped in the cracked leather strop, the oil and rags beside it in a plastic milk carton. He oiled the blade and worked the rust off and took it to the strop for honing. The wind shook the trees in the yard, snowflakes wobbled down the stairs. His left shoulder ached. The pain he could live with. An inch higher, the doctors had told him, and the bullet would have shattered his shoulder. He'd been lucky, they told him. Bullshit. Luck had nothing to do with it. He'd always been a better shot than Martin.

When the blade tested on the edge of the strop he went up and cut down a sapling pine, one of the ones they'd planted years ago. He stripped the branches and quartered the trunk. The wood was sappy, it would take days to dry. Green needles strewn everywhere.

He stacked the quartered logs in the shed and wiped the axe down and took it back to the cellar and had a cigarette sitting on the porch. The bench swing squealed when he moved, creaked under him. Navy blue dark blanketed the trees, blued the ground. The fallen snow periwinkle going purple in the failing light. The kitchen light went on then off. On then off. He smoked another and went in half frozen, his fingers numb, his lips chapped.

The paperwork had been tidied, the envelopes sorted. His pile stacked neatly off to the side. The dishes cleaned and put away.

Mattie met him coming out of the bathroom rubbing a towel in her hair.

Hollis called, she said. He'll call you tomorrow morning. I'm going to visit your brother. You coming?

Let me change, he said.

He went in his room to grab clothes. The wind was hissing through the window left open a crack. The cold pimply his skin.

CHAPTER 5

When they signed in the nurses told him to please not do anything to get Rich excited. Speak slowly and calmly. Don't touch him for long and don't touch his things. Don't corner him. Above all, don't shout. It had been almost a year since his last attempt.

They waited in the large visiting room, stark white walls, terrazzo floors. Flakes of paint coming off the water pipes, the radiators rattling. Mattie had battled to get Rich into a Veteran's hospital when he'd lost his shit way back, but the dishonorable discharge made it a no-go. Private hospital cost too much. State care was the only option, let his Social Security pick up the tab. Rich hadn't had much to say about it at the time. He hadn't been speaking much and a month later, he'd swallowed a whole bottle of pills and a quart of gin, no note, and had to have his stomach pumped.

Only a few of the tables were occupied, visitors speaking softly to a patients in white robes. Sometimes they reached across the table and touched hands. Sometimes they cried. A nurse sat near the window reading a magazine, chewing gum.

Rich came in wearing gray pajama bottoms and a hooded sweatshirt and came over, scratching his beard.

He'd changed. It wasn't just the beard. The eyes, brown and glassy like marbles. And the hands, the arms—thinner, the bones pronounced in a way he'd never seen them, lined with new white

scars like he'd put his hand through a window. The old scars were still there, too: a jagged white crescent moon, right above the elbow, from when he'd lost a bet as kid that he could cut a mole out of his arm with a bottle cap, a line in the hair above his lip from shrapnel he'd taken in Baghdad.

Hi, baby, said Mattie.

You could have come up to my room, said Rich. He looked at Gene, still scratching his beard, and said, When did you get back?

Two days ago.

Well, said Rich, nodding. He cleared his throat and leaned over the table, hands folded, and said, I had a dream you got shot over there. Twice.

Once.

No, two dreams.

You gave me too much credit, said Gene. He smiled.

How are you? asked Mattie.

Rich said, My doctor said they might change my medications. I've been feeling tired. Are you all right?

Me? said Gene. Yeah, why?

I mean about your wound.

I didn't say anything about it.

I know you didn't. I'm asking. I dreamt you got shot. You told me that you did. I'm asking how you are.

Gene bit off a piece of skin from his upper lip and worked it between his teeth. When did you dream it?

A long time ago.

It wasn't that long ago.

The dream or the wound?

Gene rubbed his face. Okay, he said. I don't want to do this.

Do what?

The circle talk.

Gene, said Mattie.

I'm not talking in circles, said Rich. I asked you a question.

Ask me again.

Two in a row. Okay, I asked you if you were all right?

I told you I was.

No, you told me yeah. Yeah isn't fine. Yeah is the answer to a yes or no question. I didn't ask you a yes or no question. Then I asked which was a long time ago, the dream or the wound, and you still don't know.

Rich, said Mattie. Both of you. Cut it out. You haven't seen each other in four years and you're going to do this?

Five, said Rich. He didn't see me the year before he left. He was still knee deep in his Dad crusade.

Rich, said Gene, don't do this in front of her.

Do what? I asked you a simple fucking question. But here's the thing. You were never very good at answering questions. Like Dad.

Gene sat back and poked a finger through a crack in the plastic seat back. Five minutes in and he already wanted to knock his brother out. Clock him in the nose, watch the blood drip onto his shirt, fucking button-pushing circle talk.

You know what, Rich? said Gene. Ask me again.

Both of you, said Mattie. I'm serious. Why are you doing this? We're here to visit, we're all

that's left. Why are you doing this?

All that's left of what, ma? asked Rich.

She let out a breath and unwrapped the plastic container she'd brought. Inside was the last piece of Gene's cake.

Here, she said. I brought you this.

What is it?

She pushed the container across the table. It's cake, she said.

Rich took the container in his hands, turned it around, flipped it upside down. It stuck, held to the top for a moment before the bottom skin of the cake gave and the icing dropped onto the inside of the plastic lid. He pushed it halfway across the table with a finger.

Rich said, Do you remember when I was seventeen and you were ten, and dad took us on that hunting trip?

Which one?

You know which. First time we let you lead. It was snowing so bad that we could hardly see. Or at least Dad and I, but you could see fine. I don't know how you ever did that. Good tracker, good shot. You tracked that doe and spotted her in the trees. Do you remember that? Do you remember how dad and I let you take the shot, and how you only wounded her, caught her right here in the chest. You remember? Okay. And do you remember when we went over to her, and you're shaking like a leaf, and it's freezing outside and we go over there to the doe and she's just lying there on her side in all that white, and the blood's coming out of her, and it's this halo spreading out under her. And I look over at you and you're standing there looking at her like you don't know what to do. You should have seen that, ma. When's Gene ever been confused about something? He just gets up and goes and does stuff, lets things fall where they will. Like Dad.

Mattie slid the container closer to him.

What is it? he asked as if he'd never seen it before.

It's cake.

He glanced at it before he turned back to Gene and said, You remember how you stood there in the cold, watching her bleed out? You remember how her black doe eye looked right into yours and wouldn't look away? How her chest went up and down, in and out, quick and hard? No?

Get to the point, said Gene.

I remember, said Rich. I remember standing there thinking do it, Gene. Just do it. Just take the shot. Put her out of her misery. Don't let her suffer, Gene. Don't let it go on like this. But you didn't do anything. Dad blabbed a while and walked away, probably thinking, who knows, whatever dad thought. Another fuck-up in the lives of his fuck-up sons. But you didn't go. You didn't shoot. You just stood there, staring back at her, your eye, the doe eye, just *staring*. And I'm standing there like *come on, take the frigging shot*. But you didn't. And I couldn't do anything. Or *didn't*, maybe. That's the better way of putting it. All I did was freeze watching you watch her bleed out. Watching her watch you. Do you remember that? Do you remember what I had to do?

You shot her, Gene said.

What?

Gene pointed at his brother, clicked his thumb. He said, Boom.

Rich nodded. Thank you, he said. Yes. I took the shot. I had to. You wouldn't.

I'll tell you, brother. Don't sit there and try and pull some shit with me. Not in front of mom.

I'm not. I'm just tired and I'm sick and I'm sick and tired of them watching me.

Of who?

The hospital. Where are we, Gene? Do you have a cigarette?

You quit, said Mattie.

Rich looked right at her and said, That's what we do, we quit. Let's change the subject. Mom is

disturbed. You stopped dying your hair. I just noticed.

Mattie re-positioned her purse on her lap and put her chin in her palm. She said, It got expensive.

Money troubles, ring-a-ding, Gene.

Subject change, said Mattie. Did you ask about the outside visits?

Rich paused, his eyes on the table. Then he nodded and said, I can have out of hospital visits if I'm *supervised*. Emphasis mine. They emphasized the if.

How have you been feeling? asked Mattie.

I told you. Tired.

What do they have you on? asked Gene.

Pills? Anti-depressants?

How's it working?

How's it look from that side of the table?

Do you want to eat this now? asked Mattie. She opened the lid of the container and slid it across the table. The bottom of the lid was covered in dark chocolate frosting, the icing letters smeared and broken.

Rich didn't say anything back. He stared at Gene across the table and Gene stared back. Then Rich looked into his lap and said, I'm going to go to bed.

Rich waited while they put on their coats and gloves. Then he stood and hugged Mattie and she told him she'd stop by tomorrow or the day next and that she loved him. Gene offered his hand. Rich just looked at it, his fingers crawling up his beard.

On their way out Rich called, Which was it? Your discharge. Honorable or what?

Which do you think?

Rich smiled and said, Or what.

CHAPTER 6

He sat up in bed watching a line of pink slide across the tree tops. In the desert the dawn had woken him up. An hour in, two, the heat became a boil. A sun so bright it hurt, dust twisting in the wind. Here it was the wind through the trees, the scrape of peeling paint. Pine boughs bending, snow caught in the needles like bits of cotton blown on the wind, then springing up in a cloud of white against the lightening dark. The phone rang at six.

You take too long, motherfucker.

Hollis fucking Lerne.

Welcome home, soldier. How the fuck are you?

I'm out. Back in Orion.

So Nate says. Hollis laughed and said, You pissed at him?

Asshole bought my mom's truck for four hundred.

Four's a special number for Nate. Number of brain cells he's rubbing. And he's pissed about his window.

Fuck him.

What's this about you getting hit?

Friendly in Tal Afar. Lucky I took it in the shoulder.

Tal looked like a cluster fuck. Sure you didn't do it yourself?

Should have.

Let's get a beer. I'm working tonight, but I could do tomorrow. Nate said something about you needing a job, too. I got that covered, Specialist.

Corporal. Is it legit work?

Does that matter?

I'm taking care of my mom, man. Trying to keep things quiet, get my head in check.

Working at a machine shop legit enough? I got stake in Brewster's down by the river. Always slots open for you.

I'll think about it.

Think about it? Better pay than anywhere else.

Gene cracked the window open and flicked the cigarette stub out. The cold bit his fingers. He picked at the peeling paint on the frame and pulled off a strip.

You buying tomorrow?

Suppose I am. Jim's at seven. I got some other stuff to talk about, but I'll save it for then.

Seven it is.

Good to hear from you, Temmens.

He hung up and sat with the phone on his lap, the paint strip between his fingers. He reached out the window and let go, watched the strip flutter down, the wind blow it into the gutter.

He called the mortgage company and Veteran's Affairs on the kitchen phone and finished his cigarette on the back porch. Most of the gray had burned off and left long blue streaks behind the clouds. The wind stank like the river. When he went in he stood in the kitchen and listened. That cough was getting worse, sharper. It came through the walls at night. Clockwork his ass.

She shuffled downstairs and into the kitchen a few minutes later.

What time is it?

Nine-thirty.

She yawned and stared into the fridge and said, Rise from the dead.

Good news. Disability check's in the mail. Bad news is the mortgage company won't budge.

They want the full balance in less than thirty days or its eviction.

Then it's eviction. What's on the docket today?

We don't have enough to move. Or a place.

Just make the coffee and shush. Next questions.

Job hunting.

She took out eggs, a pan from the cabinet and started melting butter. A coughing fit bent her over the door.

Have you been to the doctor?

She cleared her throat and said, I'll go.

When?

When we can afford it.

She went into the living room and he heard the news on the television. There had been a robbery in downtown, another hit and run. The mayor was talking about legislation to improve the city's economy, stimulate growth. Tear down the abandoned buildings and replace them with new ones. Work with the shops and banks to keep jobs and mortgages in Orion. The police chief was talking about more cops, more laws. The butter was sizzling in the pan.

More cops, more laws, she said as she came back and started cracking eggs. What does it fix?

Have you seen that pack of dogs?

She nodded and said, Once. Outside John's, right before it closed. That was months ago. I'm surprised they're still around.

They won't survive the cold.

You never know.

He cut through the woods toward Main and kept an eye out for tracks. Paw prints in twos,

groups of fours trailing behind. The swishing drag of a tail in the snow. Where the trees broke into fields sloping toward town he found a set of scuffed paw prints around a ripped open McDonalds bag. Ketchup crusted dry over the ground, the shredded packets scattered. The paper bag wet in the snow. The tracks went in all directions, big loping strides, mostly toward the river. In the distance the tree line curved down and met the road and broke for moldy brick buildings and sidewalk and undeveloped lots caged in sagging chain link.

Downtown looked worse in daylight. Every crack in every building wall and sidewalk slab, every broken street light, every shattered, tipped parking meter dusted with ice. The ones still standing were expired, cars parked on both sides of the street. He hadn't seen a single parking enforcer, a single yellow metal boot on a tire. The few people he passed never looked twice. Numb to it, he supposed, just like he would be given a few months. Then the shock would be gone and replaced with what? Just that: numbness.

All the way up Fenn to Main half the buildings boarded up, the other half bodegas and liquor stores, storefront churches and thrift stores. The largest still in business was Ron's sporting goods store, a massive pair of fiberglass deer antlers over the outside door, black paint peeling. Three sales in the windows, no one going in or out. He went in and asked the clerk how much he'd give for a twenty-two A-bolt.

Good condition? Fifty.

You fucking with me?

Ammo included, seventy. That's it.

The clerk motioned to the rack behind the handgun case, A-bolts hung floor to ceiling.

I'm talking in perfect condition, old-school Savage.

The phone rang. The clerk picked up and flashed Gene seven fingers.

Gene flipped him the bird.

Outside he bought a cup of coffee and the paper from a bodega and lit a cigarette on the sidewalk. Someone had tagged the windows all the way down to Third. RIP Phil, RIP Dub, RIP Shanae we love you miss you motherfucker, over and over again is drippy black lines. Red slashes over some, white over others. Plain and simple tallies. Lists of the dead on scratched up glass, going out of business signs behind them. Across the street the storefront Church of Christ Our Lord advertised A WAY OUT in blue window paint. Beside it a liquor store, the neon signs already lit.

He stole a pen from the First National Bank lobby and sat in Rigel park circling ads. Washing dishes at the Fenn Diner for minimum wage wasn't going to cut it. Not at ten hours a week. Neither was being a parts courier at Jack's machine shop, vehicle required. Two options in town, both garbage.

He tore the ads out and finished his coffee on the bench flipping through the paper. A lot of talk how if only Detroit auto and steel would get their shit together so could Orion. They were high as kites if they thought anything good was coming. Change *was* coming, just shit getting worse and worse. Orion boys limping home with bullet scars wouldn't help. He finished his cigarette and swallowed the grounds at the bottom of the cup like smoky dirt going down his throat.

The corner pay phone's cord was cut so he dropped the receiver in a trash can and started walking. He took Main to River and followed it past machine shops until Jack's popped up three or four miles down squatting off a paved roundabout with trees on either side. The parking lot was half full and the warehouse doors open. He went in the front. No one at the desk. Around the side three guys were loading crates full of polished metal rods.

You know where I can find the foreman?

Jack? said one of the guys. He aimed a half smile at the floor and hefted an armful of rods.

Anyone I can talk to about an app.

No jobs, said another guy.

Finney, said the first guy. He point a gloved finger toward the roller belt at the shipping door.

Gene waved and caught sight of the girl from Jim's pushing packages along the belt, her hair tied back.

Laura, right?

She looked up and smacked a box.

Gene.

I remember. What do you want?

A job. You the foreman.

Finney's the foreman. He's around somewhere. What job?

Says courier. Anything else open?

She frowned and turned back to the belt and started checking packages and moving the queue.

She said, Jim said you're one of Hollis's buddies. Why don't you get a job with him.

You know Hollis?

Everyone knows Hollis. Thought you were here on one of his errands, actually.

He stepped up to the belt and watched her work. As soon as she grabbed a package she checked the packing slip, checked the box to make sure it was packed right, then moved it down the belt. At the end of the queue she came around the other side and shooed him out of the way and filled the boxes with packing peanuts and taped them up.

Two jobs, he said. What for?

Finney's down at the end.

He scooped a handful of packing peanuts from a box and turned and across the warehouse. He pegged Finney as the guy standing next to two other guys flipping through sheets of paper on a clipboard

You Finney?

They guy looked at him, then looked over his shoulder and nodded.

I saw an ad for a courier job.

Taken.

Already? Anything else open up?

You serious? said Finney.

Gene snapped a packing peanut and up rubbed it between his fingers. It fell like pink and white snow flakes on the toe of his boot.

He headed east toward the river and on Factory and went from factory to factory, shop to shop, offering the same story. He'd sweep, cut lumber, saw or hammer or climb any ladder, anything just give him a job. He told them he'd grown up here, he was a vet, people knew him.

Like who? asked a shop foreman.

Like Denny Brise, said Gene. He pointed across the shop to a guy working a bandsaw and said, Went to high school with him.

Hey, Brise, the foreman shouted.

Denny looked up and shut the bandsaw down. He came over, his goggles around his neck, looking from Gene to the foreman.

You know this guy?

Denny looked him over a second then he smiled and said, Gene Temmens, right? East High. How you doing, man?

Just got back, said Gene. Looking for a job.

The foreman said, Fill out an app, I'll ask the boss to take a look.

But do you have anything? asked Gene.

The foreman shrugged and said, Someone might quit. We'll keep it on file.

Taking a smoke break, said Denny.

Gene followed him out the break room doors. A freight truck rumbled past and hung a left on the corner.

Heard you went to Iraq, said Denny.

Third ACR.

Any good?

I'm back here aren't I?

That's most of them.

Round here, anyway.

You think they'll hire?

He tried to catch Denny's eyes as they talked, but Denny looked out over the small parking lot, at the beat-up cars and trucks jammed into the too-small lot, at the broken up pavement coated in slush. Every car had a nick or a dent, every other window a spiderweb crack or a plastic bag taped over the missing glass. Rusting bumpers, tail lights smashed out. A back wheel spare going bald around the edges. The tailpipe of a truck hanging almost to the ground.

Then Denny squinted up at him and said, You tried Brewster's?

Where Hollis works.

If you know Hollis you got an in.

Lot of shady shit in orbit. I'm trying to stay clear.

Not happening. You in Orion, you're in orbit. You and the shit bumping foreheads. That's where all the work's coming out of if you take my meaning.

I think I do, said Gene. He shook Denny's hand and started off, fingers numb.

By five it was dark. The cold thick and heavy along the river. He stood on the street outside Brewster's Machine Shop, huddled under a bus awning. An intake, outtake on the river, pump building

—that was foundry. One storage lot for wood, one for metal. Fifty or sixty parking spaces full and more than a few cars parked on the grass between the lot and the fence. Five or six guys standing outside the Foundry doors, smoking and talking.

He threaded his gloved fingers through the frozen chain link fence. Save every cent and slowly, slowly, they might dig their way out, do the paperwork for Rich, untie the court order, and in a year take off to Arizona or New Mexico. Someplace warm for Mattie, quiet for Rich. Then he could get away from Hollis, from all the Third ACR bullshit that followed him. Lose the trail in the desert. Hide under a rock. Save every cent. Fix shit.

He sat down on the bench. An old man seated beside him touched his arm.

You waiting for the one-twelve? asked the old man.

Nope.

Can I get a smoke?

He passed the old man a cigarette and lit it.

Headlights crested over the old man's bristly, jagged face, slid off his coat.

Hey, said the old man. You know what Orion is?

What?

It's the asshole of Earth. Know what we are?

Gene shrugged.

The old man smiled and said, The shit clinging to the hairs. I didn't know that at your age.

Know it now?

The old man took a long drag, the cherry glowing. Then he said, Getting around to it.

The idea was to be as close to a tank as possible. Nothing short of an IED or RPG would dent them. No shortage of those, either. But the lack of oversight made Anbar attractive. Like a first date

girl and her daddy's out of town, Hollis had said. And she's yours. And she's sweet.

Gene turned up Fenn and put his head down against the wind. If it hadn't been tank support he would have gone sniper team. Tops in marksmanship, fat lot of good it had done him. Best shot in squad didn't mean much. Not next to those guys.

Sanchez scalped a guy once. They'd actually laughed about how bad a job it was. They'd been tweaked on uppers, wound tight. Village ambush, six dead in the street. Dogs barking, kids crying. Faces in the windows. And Hollis walking back and forth smacking his chest yelling what you looking at while Sanchez peeled the skin off some fucker's skull. It was a thrill after all those endless hours working checkpoint. But checkpoint was where the money was. What's it worth to get through? He must have said that a million times, straight-faced. Tapped his rifle. How much? There was no price too high. Back home they'd be nothing. There they were businessmen. Masters of the angles. Reivers, Martin had said. His bald skull burned red in the sun. They called him blood orange and he'd laughed and told Sanchez give him the knife, he'd lick it clean. And he very nearly did.

On Main the traffic shot slush out from under tires. On the corner outside the Luxxor hotel, the homeless huddled in their blankets against the boarded up door. The awning above them torn and blowing in the wind. The upper stories lost in the dark.

Yo, a bum said as Gene passed.

He looked down. A bum was holding up his cup, rattling the change.

You think I got money to give?

More than I do. Asshole.

He dropped a cigarette in the cup and stuck another between his lips

You could have been me, the bum called behind him.

Still might, he called back.

He went into Jim's and sat down at the bar. Jim was at the other end pouring beers. Nate was

nowhere. Laura nowhere. He didn't recognize the faces at the other end. Beer sweat on the bar in front of him, a ripped up coaster. He drew a circle with his finger, dragged it through the water. Things have a way of circling back. Him, Hollis, then, now. Save every cent. Fix shit. Maybe circled wasn't the right word. Spiraled fit, the lines turning in, not out.

Jim came over and slapped the bar and said, You doing all right?

Doing what?

CHAPTER 7

He arrived a little past seven and went in and shook the snow off his coat. The bar was packed and most of the tables were taken, the blown speaker over the door whoofed on every bass note. He waved to Jim and saw Laura at the back bar, but she was busy making drinks. Then Hollis was coming through the crowd, arms out, a thick guy in a flannel behind him. He clapped his his arms around Gene and pounded his back.

What's this shit? said Hollis. You starting a beard?

How you doing, Lerne?

I'm fucking great. Come here. Llew, this is Gene Temmens, the guy who watched my ass for three years in the meanest shit on planet Earth. Gene, this is retard prime: Llewellyn Orsten. Works with me over at Brewster's.

They shook hands and pushed up the bar. Nate was there and he turned around in his stool as soon Gene caught his eyes.

Thanks for my window, asshole.

Lucky it's just cracked.

I'm serious.

So am I, said Gene. You want to see how serious?

Yo, shouted Hollis. Nate. This is my boy. This is his homecoming. We're going to celebrate.

You want to bitch at him you make an appointment and see him in the week.

Jim came around and smiled and said, What you having?

Whatever he's buying, said Gene. He pointed at Hollis.

Three specials, said Hollis. Listen, Llew, I got to catch up with Gene. I'll catch you tomorrow.

Llew nodded and downed his shot and patted Nate on the shoulder. They slid off the barstools and headed for the door.

Jim put down two shots of whiskey and two beers.

You paying for JD these days, said Gene.

We're celebrating, said Hollis. My boy has arrived. To the Third.

They clinked shot glasses and knocked back their shots. The whiskey slid down like a line of fire and rolled around Gene's empty stomach. He chased it with his beer and Hollis pounded his back. Beer sloshed over the side of the glass.

Hollis waved a finger over the glasses and Jim poured another round.

Your toast, said Hollis.

To work, he said.

Shit, said Hollis.

They clinked glasses again and knocked them back. The tears stood in Gene's eyes, the line of fire now a road. He chased it with two big swallows and coughed and wiped his mouth with a handful of napkins. No trigger to squeeze after every drink, no bottles to shoot and watch the glass fall on the desert sand like stars dropped out of the sky. The fire crawled from his throat to his cheeks, his nose. When he looked up he caught Laura's eyes from the far end of the bar. Then she turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

Hollis steered them to a table on the opposite wall.

You glad to be back?

Fuck you think?

I don't know. Nate says you're looking for work, shit's not so good at home. I'm thinking okay, but this is the motherfucker that ran shit when I took two. Why would he need a job so bad? You must have come out with a nice stash.

It's gone.

Hollis stared at him over his beer. He said, What do you mean gone?

Gone. Someone stole it.

Who stole it?

I don't know.

Hollis put his glass down and leaned forward, fingers laced. He said, I want to lay out a few rules. First thing: never talk about it to anyone except me. No one. I know you, I trust you, we're fucking solid. It's not you I'm worried about.

Who am I going to talk about it to?

That's not the point. You don't say shit to anyone about what we had going on over there. And whatever we talk about here stays at the table. Just you and me. We clear?

Crystal.

Then what the fuck happened? Start with the however much grand you had stashed at forward base.

Seventy or so. Like normal. I had your guy looking after it.

Whoa, whoa. My guy? You mean Rodriguez? He got transferred.

After you left he did. I brought someone in and gave him a cut.

Who? I told you never bring in someone new.

And do what? Let it sit there? That's asking to get robbed.

So is bringing in some motherfucker you don't know.

I knew him enough.

Bullshit. *Who?*

Donaldson. I told you, you don't know him.

Okay, but how did *you* know him?

He was handling munitions requisitions, my go-to for resupply before Tal Afar. And he knew me because he was buying from us before without knowing it was us. He was cool.

Says you, said Hollis. He shook his head and laughed out of the corner of his mouth and said, I never even heard of this guy.

He didn't know how I'd gotten all that money, and he never asked. He just looked after it and I gave him a cut.

How much?

Ten.

Ten fucking percent.

You threw Rodriguez eight.

But Rodriguez was an idiot. He thought he was making angles happen, pinching shit off the top when he thought I wasn't looking. It kept him quiet.

You want to cook up a plan or should I tell the fucking story?

What happened to Donny boy?

Transferred soon as I went into Tal Afar.

Of course. Who took his place?

Gene shrugged and crushed the cigarette out in the ashtray. He said, That's part of the problem.

Whoever did the hospital paperwork would have known, so that's at least two or three guys who knew I

was out of commission. Then it was open season. Donaldson might have taken it. Might not have. Might have gone in with a couple of other dudes.

If you think Donaldson did it why didn't you go after him?

Because I lost the network, Lerne. Fuck, I lost it before I got shot. Tal Afar wasn't Anbar, too much oversight. I was worried enough about getting caught and then I took one. Three months in traction, two more in physical therapy, and another before I shipped home. All our funnels were scattered. I didn't have a contact at forward base anymore and I just I couldn't handle the network from the hospital, and I sure as hell couldn't go there in person to look after my shit.

Hold on, said Hollis. He made a loop in the air with his finger and said, When you got shot, who was in on it?

Me, Martin, and Sanchez. That's it.

What about this Donaldson guy?

Yeah, but he was at forward base.

Then Donaldson took it. No maybe. You're saying it was Martin, Sanchez, you, Donaldson, and three out of those four were in the middle of Tal Afar. So it had to be Donaldson. He could be sitting on your stash right fucking now, Temmens. What did I tell you? I told you not to let it get too big.

Hey, said Gene. What is this, the fucking Inquisition? I got shot, Lerne.

And now you're back and you need a job. And I got one, Temmens, but before I put my shit on the line I need to make sure we're still on the same page. Angles there, angles here. Same shit, different climate. And I love you, Temmens. I do. But I'm sure as shit not opening up what I got going on here to anyone, even a dude I love, that lost seventy grand in the fucking desert.

Are you listening? I almost *died*. But even if Donaldson did it he didn't make a case out of it. No one knows. And if anyone does know, there's still no case being made out of it, so that's that. I

don't know and I don't care.

Hollis pulled the ashtray to his side of the table and said, You ought to. It's our asses if it gets out.

The only people with evidence are you, me, and Sanchez.

There's the graves.

There's a whole fucking country full of graves.

Hollis lit two cigarettes and rolled one to Gene and Gene picked it up, the filter wet with beer sweat. A sudden hush as the last song died out, then a clap of cymbals, drums, the speaker buzzing over the door. If he told Hollis the truth, what? Would he reach across the table and knock his teeth out? Kill him? If he'd wanted to cut ties he never would have come. He reminded himself, swallowed a mouthful of smoke. Save every penny. Someplace quiet and warm.

Look, Hollis said after a while. He folded one arm over the other and let the ash of his cigarette dangle and said, All right. I don't know what to say, Temmens. You didn't play it the way I would have played it, but you're still in one piece, so whatever. Not my money. How about Sanchez and Martin?

Sanchez was still in. Martin's dead.

How?

Gene tapped his forehead.

Goddamn, said Hollis.

Gene finished his beer and pulled a napkin from the dispenser, started tearing it into strips. At the far end of the bar Laura was avoiding making eye contact with him. Or she just didn't care. He tore the strips into squares, the squares into flakes. Dusted the table like snow.

What did they pull out of you?

Gene looked at him and sucked his teeth. He said, Seven six-two.

Fuck. How's the arm?

Second issue. Can you get me in?

At Brewster's? Of course. Same rules as over there, just like in squad. And it goes without saying, but just to be clear, the chain of command at work is Brewster, then me. He runs it, I work foundry and keep things smooth over there. But I own as much of the shop as he does. By next year probably more. Room to move up, too. I take care of my boys, Temmens. And Brewster's good at taking care of his vets. Got a lot of them jobs there.

That shit must have cost. Why even come back to Orion?

Property, for one. Shit's cheap in Orion. You know what it cost me to pick up a house and bail Brewster's out of debt, get the contracts coming in and put some new machinery on the shop floor? Hundred grand. In New York or somewhere else, that'd be dick. In Orion I'm king. Why do you think Brewster's the only one in town doing any business?

Is that the angle? You slapping contracts out the other shops' hands?

There's angles. Let's just leave it at that. Plus he's one of the only guys in town that can *do* the goddamn business since I got him the machines liquidated from other shops. Go in there tomorrow at eight, talk to Brewster. Good as gold. I'm sorry your shit is all fucked up but I told you not to let it get too big. You got a cell?

Not yet. I got your number.

That's my home. Take my cell, then I'm out. Business is booming.

Hollis wrote it out on a napkin and Gene folded it in his pocket. Then Hollis finished his beer, dropped a few bills on the table, and stood to go. He smiled down at Gene and slapped his shoulder and held out his hand.

Here's to good times, said Hollis.

Gene took Hollis' hand, his fingers cold, his palm sweaty.

CHAPTER 8

He sat at the bar a while after Hollis left and drank two more beers slow, the last sips room temperature, stale. The liquor warmth had burned off and left the room a little tilted. The ceiling pressed in. The floor shifted up. He spread the change from his pockets on the top of the bar.

The look on Hollis's face would have been worth it, no words to describe it. The shock, the meanness mixing in, stirred around his mouth and eyes, filling in the crow's feet, the laugh lines. Then the red around the neck, his ears. The hate.

The drunks were slumped at the bar, eyes in the glasses or staring off into the smoke. Jim was pouring shots to two women with orange tans pushing tens across the bar. Laura was coming around the bar.

He watched her clear the table, picking up the paper snow piece by piece and wipe down the table top. The ten Hollis left she crumpled in a fist.

I made that, he said as she passed by.

She shifted the bus bin to her hip and dumped the paper bits in his hand. A few flakes fluttered to the floor.

Thanks for leaving a mess.

Thanks for picking up the pieces.

You're missing a few.

More than a few.

She laughed like it was in spite of herself.

He said, I do something to piss you off?

You from here. You know Billy Marks? Or Phil Sleighton?

Should I?

Your boy does. He's a piece of work.

Lerne? He's not my boy.

She leaned across the bar and slid the ten into the till. She said, Your buddy, then.

He's not my buddy, not my boy. I know the guy. We were in squad together and he's getting me a job. But he's not my boy.

Could have fooled me.

What's your problem? I didn't do anything.

Not yet. They found Phil beat to hell down by the river last April. He was working at Brewster's, too, and him and your buddy were pretty close for a while. They used to come in and make a lot of noise. But I guess that didn't last.

That's Hollis. Not me. Don't confuse us. Ask Jim. I just got a job, I live with my mom, I'm a good boy, see?

She set the bus bin down on the empty stool beside him and started wiping down the bar.

What, he said. Living with your mom can be manly.

Look, it's nothing personal, but I don't know you. I do know Hollis, though. Or I know enough.

Okay, look. Let me buy you a drink, we'll talk, and if you don't like me, I'm gone.

It's Orion, she said. She dumped the rag in the bin and hefted it on her hip. She said, You're already gone.

He stumbled into his coat and out the door. He turned, scanning the buildings. A few lights on in the windows above the stores, shadows moving behind the curtains and shades. A billboard read BUY WHOLE—and the rest was unreadable, the spotlight blown. Not a roof on the block with an overhang. Steep slants, dark windows. Flat tarmac with bubbled lips and chimneys shooting up between them, a tangle of telephone wires and poles. Perfect sniper spots.

His fingers curled around the flakes of paper in his pocket.

Cold Orion, dead Orion. It lay low and black beneath an icy crust of white. He looked up to see if he could find the constellation but it was gone. The hunter, all the stars, blotted out by clouds. The moon a dull gray haze. No light. Nothing to navigate by.

CHAPTER 8

In the morning, tired and hungover, he dragged himself to the bus stop and sat under the awning. A guy paced the sidewalk biting his nails. After a few minutes he came over to Gene scratching a scab on his cheek.

You got a buck or two? I'm trying to catch the bus.

To where?

North.

Wrong bus, asshole.

The guy jammed his hands in his hoodie pockets and walked away fast. Gene waited ten, fifteen, twenty minutes.

Fuck it, he said and started walking. Broken gray sky, heavy clouds. A few flakes of snow flitting down. The bums huddled under the awning of the Luxxor, wrapped in blankets and newspaper and sheets of stained cardboard. Three cars with busted windshields on Fenn, one alarm still going off. The sound hit him like a brick.

On the corner of River road two Orion cop cars were pulled over with their lights flashing. A station wagon had gone through the guard rail and lay in the ditch a few yards away from the river bank. Glass everywhere, bits of torn tire. The curled bumper sticking up like a finger bone above punctured guard rail.

At Brewster's the parking lot was filled with cars and trucks parked between mounds of black slush. A forklift backed up in the lumber yard and the beeping dug through his skull and vibrated behind his eyes. Ash drifted down and cold rain fell where the snow melted in the updraft of the smokestacks.

He went in and brushed the ash and snow from his coat and asked for Brewster. The receptionist pointed to the double doors. The shop floor was lit with overhead fluorescent racks, flashes of sparks and the gray light filtering through grimy windows above. Lines of reflective yellow tape cordoned off the machines, numbered on the end. The workers in gloves and thick rubber smocks and hardhats and goggles glanced at him and went back to the huge machines. Two belts of roller beds at the far end, five guys loading a semi trailer. The noise was overwhelming. He knocked on the door to a glass windowed office set against the east wall and went in.

A heavy-set man with a thick black mustache stood up from behind a desk and shook Gene's hand. He looked like one of his father's Army buddies, gray around the temples, big in the gut, trying hard to look neat with his too-starched shirt and too-long tie.

Temmens?

Yes sir.

Close the door. I couldn't hear you. Temmens?

Yes sir.

I'm Brewster. Sit down, sit down and quit sirring. Brewster's fine. Lerne told me you were in Third together. Driver or gunner?

Support.

Now I remember, said Brewster. He looked at his watch and said, Two tours, right? Two's a lot for Cavalry. But that's Orion. I don't know anyone in Orion that doesn't have someone in one branch or another. And I try and take care of them, my vets.

Did you serve?

Two tours in 'Nam, helicopter gunner. Let's talk about the job. It's machine work, mostly operating. I'm running two shifts: six to three, two to eleven. An hour for lunch, two fifteen minute breaks. You're being hired on as temporary help, Lerne's recommendation.

I appreciate it.

Brewster clicked a pen and tapped it against his mustache. He said, Benefits after 90 days. Any problems you come to me.

Is it union?

Brewster grunted and looked out the window and said, In a way. I understand you're good buddies with Lerne, and he's done a lot for the shop, but you come to me first. You read me? Now, you done machine work before?

I took a few engine courses in the Army during Basic. Worked a summer at a machine shop on Lake Michigan when I was 16.

Brewster flipped the pen onto his desk and rubbed at his mustache. He stared out the window for a while before he took out some forms and Gene signed them.

Last thing, said Brewster. I'm not taking on any more partners. I'll tell Lerne the same damn thing.

He threw Gene a hard hat, goggles, and a pack of earplugs and Gene followed him onto the shop floor. The tour went quick. Foundry there, grinding here, stations one through ten on this wall, eleven through twenty on the other side. Almost all vets, guys mostly, but there was a woman with her hair wrapped up in a net cutting hollow metal poles at station nineteen. She looked up when Brewster passed, a long thin scar from the corner of her mouth to behind her ear. The skin white along the length.

You get the smock and gloves tomorrow, Brewster shouted. Wear steel-toe boots. First shift,

six AM. Any questions?

When's pay day?

Two weeks.

Where's Lerne work?

Brewster was already walking away. Without turning he waved a hand over his shoulder and shouted, Wherever he wants.

He got to Jack's by noon, a little after. The warehouse door was open again, Jack was nowhere to be seen. Most of the guys were standing in the side yard smoking and holding steaming paper cups and sandwiches. He asked about Laura and they pointed him toward the shipping desk. She was there flipping through a stack of glossy shipping labels, chewing on a strand of dark hair.

Hiya.

She looked up and spit out the strand. She said, Did you come here to talk to me?

I was going to say I was sorry for last night. If I was rude.

Well, you weren't.

What about Billy?

She picked a label out of the pile and stood up and said, What about him?

You told me about Phil. What happened to Billy.

Worse.

Hollis did it?

Why am I talking to you about it if you're his buddy?

Why am I telling you we're not buddies if that could come back to bite me in the ass?

He followed her back to the shipping belt and pushed the packages down the rollers while she checked the labels. When she found the box she was looking for she tore the old label off and stuck the

new one on, filled it with peanuts, and taped it up.

I'm working at Brewster's, he said.

So is most of Orion.

How come Jack's is still open?

Regardless of what you say, I don't trust you.

Brewster said he wasn't taking on partners. Okay, I get it. Hollis has money. He's got Brewster's up to snuff, better maybe. Squeezing the contracts out of other shops or collecting on whatever work they pick up. It's a funnel.

That's awesome, she said and sat on the rollers. You figured Orion out.

He's got the muscle to do it, too. So dudes like Phil and Billy, they get smart and they get slapped around.

Or worse.

Or worse. And the rest of the shops throw in. Protection money, whatever he calls it. Brewster's picks up the choice contracts, holes like Jack's get the dregs and still have to pay on top. Not much going around that doesn't go through his hands.

He offered her a cigarette and she shook her head. She said, I quit. Why are you trying to prove that you're too cool for school? I know you and him were in the Army together.

Three years. He got shot and went home.

And then you did the same.

Gene nodded and lit his cigarette. He took a long drag and said, That don't make me hired muscle. Or me and him the same.

You didn't answer my question.

Because I like you.

She nodded and kicked her leg under the belt. Her fingers played over the roller wheels and one

fell off and rolled across the floor. She hopped down and picked it up, taped it back and gave it a test spin. It wobbled but held.

You don't know me.

You don't make it easy.

On purpose. Persistence doesn't always pay off.

Can I call you sometime?

She sighed and sat back down on the roller and motioned to the stack of boxes around her. She said, I've got to get these out. Else how is Jack going to make his pay off?

He pointed to the stack of labels on the desk and looked at her.

Go ahead, she said.

He peeled a test label and folded it, glue sides together, then folded it again. He said, I've got to go see my brother.

He work there too?

He's retired.

He folded and folded, smaller and tighter, and went out through the door as the guys were coming in.

The nurse at the desk was on the phone, typing. Two patients were yelling in the hall and the med cart was overturned. Two orderlies were scooping up pills and bottles and two more were holding an old man by the arm. The old man was shouting I keep doing it, I keep doing it, and the orderlies were crunching on pills trying to push him back in his room.

Rich Temmens, he said.

She handed him a clipboard and a pen and said into the phone, It's on the form, check the bottom.

He signed his name and passed it back.

Room three-oh-three, she mouthed.

He took the stairs two at a time to get the blood moving, stamp the cold out and came out on the third floor. The stink, urine, bleach, mingled with baby powder, the hot metal musk of radiators. A pair of nurses in bright blue scrubs and rubber shoes pushed a stainless steel cart down the hall knocking on doors, calling meds. In the common room three guys sat on chairs against the wall staring up at a television. A black and white western flickered on screen. A cowboy in a black hat cocked his revolver and fired and the image jumped. A guy in a white hat grabbed his chest and fell on his back. One of the guys cross his legs and laced his fingers behind his head.

Rich's room was on the corner, caddied between two others. He was hunched over his desk, cutting newspaper articles with safety scissors. The smell of paper, glue.

Gene dropped the pack on the desk and said, Happy Birthday.

Since when do you smoke Reds?

Since I started.

Rich clipped the article and let it fall in the pile. Yellowed newspaper clippings, glossy squares ripped from magazines. All of them on the Gulf and Iraq wars. Soldiers in desert fatigues, tanks trailed by dust clouds, Iraqis and Kuwaitis looking out from the frayed cut-outs or staring off across a desert torn in half. Oil fields burning, day and night, smoke spirals rising, blotting out the sky. The silhouette of a platoon against jets of fire rising from the sand.

Rich said, Red's all all tar.

Gene sat on the bed and patted the blanket. He said, Still making it military style every morning.

Still. Still working on the project.

How's that coming?

How does it look? said Rich. He looked up at the window, the gray light on his face, his eyes. He said, I think about how you'd never do this.

Cut out articles?

Piece it together. The why, the cause. Why did I go to war? Why did you? You think there's a simple reason like what. Like Dad put you up to it? Even if he did, is that really why?

Because there was nothing else here. We had this talk a long time ago.

And there was no resolution. That's something else you'd give up on. If it was you in here, after a while you'd just shrug and go oh well, beats me. And you'd take your meds and they'd probably let you out.

You ought to let it go.

Rich looked back down and picked up the scissor. He cut along the edge, then he put the scissors down and ripped half a page out of a TIME magazine and dropped it in the pile. Black and white marble notebooks under the articles, more spilling out of the nightstand drawer. More lining the bookshelves. All stuffed with clippings, scribbling, his brother's fucked up theories.

Rich held one out without looking and asked, Do you want to see?

I saw.

Not in years. Don't you want to make sure I'm not writing suicide notes?

Do you want me to look?

Not especially, said Rich. He dropped the notebook on the floor and uncapped a glue stick, jabbed a blank notebook page.

Gene said, You want the good news or the bad news first?

You tell me.

Well, the good's good.

No, you tell me what's good and what's bad. Moralize.

Mom's not here. Who you going to impress with the conversation loop?

I have a question. Why aren't you more fucked up?

About?

Rich creased the spine of the paperback until the glue crackled. He said, The things you did.

Mom has no clue. You're never going to tell her. You're never going to tell anybody. That's how you operate. But it's bound to come out. Like your discharge.

Thanks for bringing that up last time.

It's going to eat at her. She doesn't even recognize you. No one does.

Gene lit a cigarette and dropped the lighter on the desk.

No smoking.

Good news or bad?

What are you going to tell her? How bad did it get?

Can we talk like normal people for five fucking minutes? Jesus Christ.

You have no conscience. That's the thing, Gene. And that's not something you can hide. Nor can you pretend to have one. It shows. People smell it on you.

What about you?

You said it best, Christmas ninety-two. I can't take a hit.

I didn't say that.

Yes you did. Right before I gave myself up. The last time we talked on the phone. You said Rich, you can't take a hit. Those are your exact words. You said Rich, you're wrong. This whole thing in your head, it's wrong. Then the bit about taking a hit.

Gene leaned over to tap his ashes in the sink. Then he slid the notebook out from under Rich's hands and whipped it against the door. It fell splayed in the hall.

Rich capped the glue stick and stood it up in the middle of the desk. A hint of a smile.

Gene took a long drag and the smoke tickled out his nostrils. He said, The good news is that I got a job. The bad news is that it won't cut it.

Dad always said too little too late.

I'm okay with you not liking me. I don't blame you. Just don't pull this shit with mom.

Pick it up.

You hear me?

Pick it *up*.

He went into the hall and picked up the notebook. The clipping was dangling by a thread of glue. He dropped it on the desk and sat back down on the bed.

Rich smoothed the clipping, fingers on the corners working inward. He blew on the page and scratched at his beard.

Did you hear me before? said Gene.

About not liking you?

Yes. I knew siding with dad was a shitty thing to do and I did it anyway. I didn't care.

You did it because it was easy. Why else would you have sided with dad? It wasn't like he loved you more. It wasn't about playing favorites with him. He didn't give a shit about anyone because he didn't *know* anyone. He had perfect ideas of who and what someone was in his head and the second they deviated from that? He cut them off and shut down. He did it to me, and when mom didn't react to all this like he expected her to, he walked out and stuck her with the bill.

You knew she was broke?

He did it to you, in the end. Otherwise you would have already gone to see him. Which you'll do anyway.

Back up. You knew?

I had a good idea.

Bullshit an idea.

Fuck you. How much did you send home every month? That I know for fact. What did you do that's so bad you think coming back to Orion and trying to patch things up here is going to fix you?

The penance equals the crime, I know how you work.

He slid a notebook from the drawer and flipped through. A photo of a soldier looking into sun, shielding his eyes. Smoking craters sunk into the road around him, pavement kicked up in slabs. On the next page in his brother's scrawl the words THE END. The same on the next page. And the next.

He put the notebook back and watched his brother's face screw up into something only half smile, rub a glue ball between his thumb and forefinger. Gene brushed the ashes off his lap and dropped the butt in the sink and lit another.

How do you know I'm seeing Dad?

You'll be disappointed. He won't give you a dime. Next time bring Pez. I haven't had Pez in forever. The yellow flavor.

I got to ask you something. You ever want out of here?

You mean for good?

Sure. Or let's start for a day if I supervise.

Rich laughed.

We could go hunting.

What would we shoot?

You were a good shot.

You were better, said Rich, nodding.

Gene stood and paced the room. The medicine cabinet mirror was shatterproof but that didn't mean shit. All he had to do was wrap his hand in that towel and go to work. The desk, the chair, the window and cage. There was nothing he couldn't take apart with his hands. Even his brother, grab him

by the beard, slap the smile off his face. Then Hollis, Nate. Every motherfucker that looked at him funny.

Think about it, he said.

Rich flipped through the magazine, picked up the scissors. A picture of a Mahdi militia man, AK braced on his hip, barrel in the air. Red and white bandana covering his face, dark eyes looking out.

Rich said, I have.

CHAPTER 9

Face down in the river in the pre-dawn violet. His hat soaked through, his arms spread. A paper bag lying on the frozen mud of the bank, his toes dug into the gravel. The bottom skin of his feet purple.

Gene squatted and stared down at the body. The water lapped at the sides of his face, tugged at his hat. Strands of black hair curled out under the brim. The air cold, stink of the river, piss and shit. The death smell would come later.

He'd probably gotten drunk. Very drunk with his shoes off, lost feeling from the cold, stumbled down to look at the water. No boats in sight, the dark cut-out of tress lined with periwinkle. A rivulet of gin from the mouth of the bottle to the water's edge. No other tracks but the guy's bare footprints coming from town.

Gene crushed out the cigarette on the sole of his boot. Tracks could be wiped, mud, sand, snow, anything could be disguised, any trail cut. The angle of the body like so many in Iraq, lying in the street, in the road next to an IED hole, legs blown off, arms flung half a click away. At least it was too cold for the flies. In the desert, even in the middle of nowhere, they swarmed the mass graves, stung

him while he took the ankles, Hollis took the wrists, and heaved the body over the lip of the pit, watched it tumble down and tangle in the others. Flies on their eyeballs, wings flickering over open mouths. Others, others, others. Dark eyes, dark beards. Soldier boys in body bags by the side of the road, Humvees loading what they could.

The water gurgled, black. Downriver an outboard engine backfiring like a shot. The current tugged the hat and it came free, dark red, sucked under.

He followed the river bank into town and called nine-one-one from the payphone outside the courthouse.

There's a body on the river bank, half mile south of Main. Can't miss it.

What's your name, please?

He hung up and wiped the receiver down. Then he kicked the mud off his boots on the curb. Rich's old steel toes, dug out of the attic box.

He was sweating when he knocked on Brewster's door.

Brewster moved the phone to his other ear and waved him in and said, On orders over thirty or what? Hold on. He motioned to the gear slung over the back of the chair and said, Station six, Ferguson's training you. Punch card's near reception, lunch at eleven.

He punched in and put on his gear. The goggles pinched his face and the straps of the smock cut into his shoulders. His left side already aching.

At station six Ferguson shook his hand and said, You remember me? We went to East together.

He looked the guy over, dirty blond hair, dull brown eyes set far apart. He said, Class of ninety-eight?

Ninety-nine, said Ferguson. He flipped on the grinder. The large metal cylinders hummed through the concrete floor.

Got to let it warm up for a few minutes.

Didn't you used to date big Julie Witter. That's a lot of woman.

Hey, shouted Ferguson. She put out.

They all put out.

Not Katie Bell.

Didn't she go to prom with Paul Sanders?

Dry night. He told me. You dated Mary something.

Muriel Correll.

Look her up since you got back?

Not sure she's still in town. And if she is she's probably married or pregnant.

Probably. Hollis says you were in Third ACR together. Anbar and shit. That's fucked up. I was Twelfth Infantry.

Let's do this.

Simple shit. Open her up, load the tray from the back, never the front. Like this. Close the dor, lever here, enjoy the light show. You see it through the window. Keep your hands clear, goggles on. Then you open it up, pull the tray. Bad blades go there, good go here. Rack finished trays here, take them over to station ten when there's no more room. Clear the shavings tray between every dump. Give it a whirl.

Gene loaded the tray, loaded it from the back. He shut the door and worked the lever. The grinder came down, sparks shot off. When they died off he levered the grinder and pulled the tray and checked the blade tips. The bad ones were notched or pitted, the good honed and smoking. He sett he tray down and pulled the shavings tray. Slivers of metal thin paper curled in the bottom, singed black on the ends. He dumped it and put it back.

Ferguson looked the tray over and gave him a thumbs up.

That's it?

Cake walk. You got any questions, I'll be at station nine. And careful of the shavings. Don't touch your face or anything with the gloves.

Ferguson pointed at a thin white scar under his left eye.

Good to know, Gene shouted.

At lunch he did the rounds of introductions and hand shaking. He remembered some of the guys from East High—Danny Berns who'd gotten kicked out his senior year for grabbing Mrs. Winslow's tits, 8th Infantry, Walt Skoler who'd pissed himself in the cafeteria and been shamed all the way through senior year, 11th Infantry, Pete McDonough who used to sell serious contact weed that Gene used to love, Army Recon. They rolled up their sleeves or pant legs or turned their heads and showed him their scars—a bullet here, shrapnel there, this one a stab wound where some motherfucker tried to dig in with a steak knife. A few of the guys were West Mills, some as late as class of oh-two. Almost all had been in the service. Almost all owed their job to Hollis.

Brewster came in and sat with them eating his sandwich out of wax paper. When the rest of the guys left he was still there, picking at a pile of potato chips, looking at Gene.

How's the arm holding up?

Holding.

The lunch truck's not half bad. Cheap, too. Lerne talk to you about any overtime yet?

Gene popped the last of his roast beef in his mouth and washed it down with a paper cup of coffee. He shook his head.

Had this shop almost seven years. Sank everything I had into this.

Looks like it's working.

Something like that. Bought it off McCall when he went under, got it cheap. Most of the

machinery was bust. Owe that to Lerne. Came out of his pocket.

I don't have that kind of money.

Money, said Brewster. He waved his hand dismissively and said, I'm talking having something. Ownership. You understand?

Think so.

Know so, said Brewster said. He crumbled his sandwich wrapper and threw it in the trash.

Gene went out the back door and lit a cigarette. The wind coming off the river was cut through with steam over the outtake pipe. He went out the fence and down to the river bank where the intake and outtake pipes opened on the water and put one boot up on the lip. Froth in the water, bubbling white. Break waves slapping the gravel shore. They'd have found the body by now, taken it to the morgue, put it on ice. A blurb in the paper tomorrow, maybe a phone call if he had ID on him. Another body in the river. The rumour would get as far north as Cheboygan and that would be that. All trails cut.

On the far shore bare factory lots ringed with fallen chain link fence. Crumbling smoke stacks jutting into darkening gray. Busted windows gaped like eye sockets. Orion stared back. Always had, always would.

He went down to the bank and put one foot on the intake and looked into the water. Swollen, blanched cigarette stubs bobbed against the curve of the pipe. He flicked his into the water and went in.

It was still snowing, gray and dark, when he punched out. He passed Hollis and Llewellyn in the parking lot.

How was it? asked Hollis.

My shoulder is killing me.

Little Tiger Balm. I live by it. You want to come out with us tonight after I get off?

Got to pack. I'll catch you.

When you moving?

Gene started for the gate. Soon, he called over his shoulder.

A truck was unloading in the metal yard. Four guys were covering the lumber next yard over. Steam trickled out the foundry doors. A few of the guys honked their horns or waved at him on their way out.

He raised a hand, fingers numb in the cold.

CHAPTER 10

On Friday after work he took the bus to a motel on the highway. The sign out front read WEEKLY RATES, HBO, HEAT. Pot holes in the parking lot, TVs blaring through scratched up room doors. The pool empty, yellow rings spiraling to the drain and big cracks spider-webbing up the side caked with mold. A beat up station wagon parked crooked in front of the manager's office. He knocked and went in. Mattie sat across a desk from the manager. The nameplate said Ed Alberts.

Sorry I'm late, Gene said. Work.

No problem, said Ed. I was just talking to your mom. When you looking to move?

ASAP.

Ed picked up a ring and said, I'll show you the unit.

They followed him upstairs to room two-oh-six. Ed unlocked the door and pulled the curtains back. Gray light fell on stained brown industrial carpet coming up at the baseboard around the dresser. The two twin beds were covered with orange polyester blankets. An odor like mildew and wet cat.

It matches, said Ed. He pointed from the beds to the heavy orange curtains.

So it does, said Mattie. Where's the closet door?

Ed waved at the open closet and said, Can get another for you, no proble.

How much? Gene asked.

Ninety a week, said Ed. Water and power included.

Nine with a zero? said Mattie.

Water and power included I said.

Gene went into the bathroom and flicked on the light. The tub was black, mold in the grout.

Well? the manager said when Gene came back.

Burn it, said Mattie.

Gene followed her out. They walked to the corner and sat down under the bus stop awning.

The guard rails opposite were dented and rusting, half the ground stakes missing. The cars and trucks in the far left lane kept running over a mash of reddish black pulp of fur, squirrel or cat or raccoon he couldn't tell.

You want my coat?

Mattie shook her head, a fist pressed to her mouth. The cough was a hack every morning.

Every night. He listened to it at the foot of the stairs before he went to work.

She spat a wad into the snow and made a face. She said, The ad didn't say ninety.

You didn't know it was going to be a shit hole.

Could have guessed from the address. How was work? What's wrong with your arm?

Just sore. Did the check come?

Not yet. Ice it when we get home.

The One-Fifteen came a half hour later. He paid the fare for both and sat down next to her in the middle. The two guys across the aisle were asleep, chins against their chests, clothes spattered with paint. Lunchboxes tucked under the seat.

A bright spot, said Mattie. I got the diner job starting tomorrow.

You up to it?

Washing dishes? It's the Fenn Diner, not bricklaying. Fifty or sixty extra bucks a week won't hurt.

That's as bright as it gets.

I'm a beacon of optimism. I have to be.

Listen. Don't freak. I'm thinking of going to see Dad.

Don't take a thing, she said. Promise me. Not a penny.

Mom.

Promise me.

I promise.

The bus stopped on Delaney. Brown brick project apartments, blinds cracked and crooked in the windows, screens torn. A stripped Buick on its side in the ditch. Tires in the weeds, rusting rims on front stoops. Sneakers dangling by threadbare laces from the power lines. A woman dragged two kids on the bus and took forever to dig out the fare and park it on the bench seats behind the driver. As soon as the bus started the kids started climbing all over the seat, the woman, kicking at each other and screeching. The woman told them to situate their behinds and don't move. The little girl climbed up and dug her fingers into her mother's parka. The little boy jammed a finger up his nose.

Mattie waved at them. The mother smiled.

They just get big, said Mattie.

It's all the eating.

This one's for sale. Good laborer.

The woman laughed. Late twenties, early thirties at most. She had dark purple rings under her eyes, no makeup. Her hair in tight braids, her hat in a fist.

The little boy smiled at Gene.

He likes you, said Mattie.

The kid twisted his finger out and wiped it on the seat.

Kids that age, a little older. They'd chased the tanks shouting for water. Just the sight of clear plastic bottle sent them scrambling in the dirt, kicking and screeching and fighting. The game was simple. Whoever kept up the longest got a bottle, sometimes two. Three to the kid missing a hand who'd kept up for almost two miles huffing dust, and the kid had caught it mid air, black eyes on Gene's, sweat dropping off his face. Or the swarms at checkpoints and forward bases hawking t-shirts two for five, blankets three for nine. Rows of them in the field hospitals looking blanched under the IV line, stumps bandaged, eyes covered in gauze. Some IEDs. Some friendly fire. Most were just in the wrong place, wrong time.

He dug around in his pocket and came out with seventy cents in change, half a pack of gum, and lighter. He held the pack up.

Can I?

The woman nodded. The kids were watching him, picking at their coats and squirming on the seat, eyes glued.

He waved them over and they slid off the bench and stood in front of him. A piece each, then two.

Life advice, said Gene. Invest in stocks. Be all you can be at home.

The little boy unwrapped a piece right there and smooshed it against his teeth. His sister plucked the wrapper off and took it bite by bite, little teeth chomping.

What flavor? said the boy.

Mint.

Which mint? said the girl.

Winter.

Say thank you, said the woman.

Thank you, they mumbled. Then the girl lowered the uncrumpled wrapper into Gene's hand and patted it.

Mattie smiled and patted Gene's knee and closed her eyes. The bus turned on Rockport. Snow smacked the windshield. The kids lingered in the aisle a moment, chewing and chewing and smacking their lips. A line of snot ran down the boy's nose. His sister reached over and wipe it with her sleeve.

The bus stopped on Dewey. Mattie asleep beside him, her chin on her collar, mouth pinched shut. The sky iron gray outside the windows. The woman stood up and led the kids off the bus. Gene watched through the window as she crouched on the sidewalk buttoning up their coats, pulling down their hats, fixing their mittens.

The little girl looked back

Gene waved.

They got off on Main and sat under the awning while she coughed a couple of minutes. He stood over her, one hand on her shoulder, feeling the bones through her coat.

It's doctor.

They closed the free clinic, she wheezed. Just shut up a second.

traffic had thinned. Lines of slush in the gutters, sheets of ashen snow on the hoods of cars. A week, two, the lines would be mounds. The cars buried. The plows wouldn't come. He'd need salt, more than they had. A better shovel. Better coats, better boots, gloves, hats, everything was old, rusting, frayed. He squeezed the back of her neck as she hacked, kneading. She brushed his hand off and spat under the bench. Time, money. There wasn't enough to go around. He balled his fists in his coat pockets and leaned against the awning wall. The streetlights came on, dotting Main down to Fenn.

We need things for dinner, she said.

I'll get them. You go home.

Oh stop.

He followed her to the corner store and called Nate from the payphone outside.

It's Gene.

You owe me two hundred, dude.

I need to borrow the truck.

You fucking serious?

Drop it off around seven.

Drop it off my ass. You're lucky Lerne likes you so much.

Seven. Be on time. I'm not fucking around.

Mattie came out with two bags and gave him one. She said, Who were you swearing at now?

Nate.

She frowned and said, Remember. You promised.

He nodded and slipped an arm around her, slowed his step to hers. Halfway home he took the other bag, wilted lettuce poking out the top.

When they got home he unloaded the groceries and boiled water for tea. Mattie said she'd take a shower, air out and make dinner. She went up stairs coughing, face red. He stood in the kitchen doorway, watching, fists balled. Then he went outside to the wood shed and checked the logs.

Sappy around the middle, still too much humidity.

CHAPTER 11

She was sleeping curled on her side, breathing raspy. A strand of gray hair in her eyes, shuddering with each breath. The room chilly. Three goddamn blankets and a bathrobe and her skin

still white as the sheets. No wonder she'd gotten sick. He pulled the blankets from his bed and Rich's and laid them over her. She didn't even stir. He sat in the corner chair and watched her sleep while the light crept up around the edge of the windows. Faint shadows of the falling snow on the shade.

He nudged a half packed box with the toe of his boot. Other boxes against the walls, beside her dresser. The empty drawers standing against the wall. He'd packed his room, some of the kitchen, mostly shit they didn't use. All that was left was the basement, the living room. Rich's room. She'd said on Monday she'd get to it. Now it was Saturday and the door hadn't been opened. She'd wait until the last minute and do it when he was at work or sleeping. He'd wake up and hear her through the walls, opening and closing doors, furniture scraping, crying. Why hadn't he cried? About Rich, about anything? The last time he'd cried was god knew when. In the desert, first or second year, after a firefight, probably. Maybe his first kill. But he remembered his first kill and he didn't remember crying about it. The guy's face had been bearded and dark, black eyes. His trigger finger broke where he'd tangled it in the trigger guard going down. Wearing Chucks like some yahoo from home. He remembered that, the Chucks.

Second year, maybe. The first kid he'd shot. The first civvy. Or maybe the IED that ripped an Abrams open, how the fuck he didn't know. He didn't remember the guys they found inside. He didn't remember what they did right after that. There was a lot not to remember.

Mattie twitched under the blankets. He sat forward, watching. A little tick at the corner of her mouth, the lip curling and relaxing, curling and relaxing. Full blown curl meant she was mad, super pissed. They'd always said don't get mom curled. Don't get her twitched. A curl on the other side might mean happy, might mean sad. It changed. They'd always said he did it too, just like his mom. Hollis had said the same. You got a curl when you kill, Temmens.

He sat back. She was lucky, could sleep through anything. He'd always woke at any noise like his father. Even silence woke him. Four or five times every night, to pee, to scratch, to listen. The elm

on his side of the house was scratching the siding every night. Sounded like fingers against the glass. The crack in the glass at the base of the window whistled. The screen rattled in the frame. Everything got old, wore down, made noise. Everything chipped and plunked and peeled. He nudged the toe of his boot against the leg of the dresser where scuff marks he'd made as a child still showed.

They could tick off their life in numbers, tallies at the bottom of grocery receipts, three and change for a pack of Reds, a buck for a lighter, four-fifty for lunch at the sandwich cart at work, buck-ten in bus fare. Seven more days, A-fucking-men to pay day. If the disability came with his paycheck they'd have enough, just enough to get in someplace. Eighty-four more days to benefits. Twenty until eviction. He shifted the ice pack on his shoulder and pinched the skin of his temples and pulled, twisted. The cord behind his eyes tied another knot.

A horn sounded outside. He went down and dumped the ice, threw on his coat and hat and gloves and went out.

The truck was idling in the driveway. He got in and lit a cigarette.

I got places to be, said Nate. I'm not going to Cheboygan.

That was the plan.

He dropped Nate at on Main and took the highway out Twenty-Three. There was heavy traffic going north but it stopped bumper to bumper just off the on-ramp. A semi was on its side, half of the long flat metal bed behind it punched through the guard rail and two cars with crushed fronts were being towed out of the middle of the road. Thick black lines under the truck, broken windshield glass everywhere. Two Michigan Highway Patrol cars and an Orion Police car sat in front of the truck with their lights on. One of the Highway Patrol guys was talking to the cop while the other waved traffic past orange road cones.

They'd find pieces as far out as a hundred meters from where an IED blew something to shit.

Scraps of plastic dashboard, curved metal strips of bumper. Once a whole CD player, wires and everything, lying the sand. CDs scattered around it. The closer they got the more they found. A baby seat, lengths of seat belt. Blown out tires, smoking wheel rims. Teeth, hair. Sometimes an arm. Sometimes a foot. Short stack, they called it, strong enough to rip a car apart, punch a hole in a Hummer. Log cabin for a tank. Sometimes the bodies would still be in the car, their seatbelts still on, airbags sitting in their laps like popped balloons. Bits of glass bored into the skin, half a face peeled back to the bone. It was quick but never clean. Never simple. An exposed vein spurting in rhythmic jets, slower each time, and the guy might look up and see in his face he was fucked. Language barrier gone. Meaning universal.

The cop waved his baton and Gene pulled forward. Half a mile down the cones fell back and the left lane opened. He squeezed the wheel and opened her up. Familiar rattles, the steering looser. Snow smacked the windshield.

Shrapnel scissored in legs and arms, a steering rack punched through someone's stomach, an eye jellied by the force of the blast and shot out of the socket. The sound of them going off, hollow cracks, rising booms, like a thunderclap in a spring sky.

The sign said full service but there were no attendants outside so he pulled up and started pumping. The snow was coming down hard and thick, clumps of white just beginning to stick. The smell of gas faintly sweet. The pump ticked off dollars, click-thump, click-thump. His fingers tapped out the beat on his thigh. He felt nervous standing out in the open next to the truck, naked, exposed. Nothing above him but the canopy, no cover on three sides.

Above the highway traffic sunlight burned through the clouds and threw sliding patches of light across mottled fields. The river stink was gone, the smell of piss and ripe dumpsters with it. His coat smelled like the shop, hot metal, shavings, smoke. Little cuts across the top of his hand stinging in the

cold.

He topped off the tank and went in to pay. At the check out were two girls in heavy coats and boots. Their hoods were down and their hair was long and glossy down their backs, tight jeans, no gloves. They were paying for two candy bars and a pack of cigarettes.

I need a key? Gene asked. He jerked this thumb toward the restroom.

The clerk shook his head. He said, Aim for the bullseye.

The men's room smelled like an armpit. Piss all over the floor, sticky and shiny, the plastic holder for the urinal cake upside down, the cake gone. A cockroach lay belly up in the drain, kicking weakly. He unzipped and read the writing on the wall above the urinal. For a good time call Jennie 674-669-8596 Jennie gave me Sif It's SIPH dumb ass Its STEF and she's HOT FUCK YOU SUCK MY FAGGOTfag fag homophobe homo phone.

When he came out the girls were gone.

Pump three, he said to the clerk. And a pack of Reds.

Could those jeans have gotten any tighter? the clerk said. He was watching the girls get into their car.

I hope so, said Gene.

Did you hit it?

Flushed him.

He was a fighter. Been there since five.

We all go sometime.

Life's only constant. God bless, brother. The clerk gave him his change. Have a good one.

He went out past the pumps and climbed the weedy ramp to the road and stood there waiting for traffic to thin out. On the far side a field spreading out to the horizon, the distant shadow of trees. The weedy ground patched with snow. He crossed and went to the fence line and lit a cigarette, fingers

numb. Tire tracks in the mud of the ditch, white paper cups crushed under the dandelions, stalks bent, leaves withered. A pair of chickadees was calling out from the weeds, pecking at the frozen ground. Strange to see them so far from town.

He leaned his elbows on the fence wire and looked out across the field. The clouds were moving south east, slow and thick, dragging the light behind them. The chickadees hopped from the grass and lighted on the fence wire, beaks full of dried grass stalks. Then they took off in rapid little flaps toward the highway, over and beyond it. He turned back to the field.

Out beyond the shadows of the clouds the snow lay thin and whole, untouched by the sun. Like worn white linen, gauze over a wound. Flat and dark toward the distant trees, themselves just lines against the curve of earth and sky.

The thing was how clean Cheboygan was. No trash blowing in the streets or clumped in alleyways, no blocks of burnt-out row homes squatting on the pavement. The shops on Main were full and bright, the restaurants were filled. No one looked scared.

He turned down Duncan. Homes pressed up against the woods that bordered the shore of Lake Huron. Low brick walls surrounding snow-covered lawns. Driveways shoveled, already salted. A few of the homes had Christmas lights up, plastic snowmen and Santa Clauses sitting in gift laden sleighs. Their arms bent back, whips ready to crack across the reindeers' backs.

He pulled up at six-twelve and shifted into park. Weeds poked through the snow under the mailbox. The curtains were drawn on the windows. No smoke from the chimney, no lights, no ornaments except little faded American flags blowing in the wind. The truck wasn't in the drive.

He kicked a boot up on the dash and slid down in the seat. The truck tick-tick-ticked as it cooled. The bench seat creaked. He flipped the ashtray open and shut and pushed the lighter in. It popped and he held it cupped in his hands for the heat. Red glowing coils, the smell of hot metal.

He woke to his father rapping on the window and trying the handle.

Gene unlocked it and sat up.

Did you fall asleep with that in your lap?

His father pointed to the lighter.

Gene put it back and got out and stretched. His father held out his arms.

What time is it? asked Gene.

Noon. Come here.

Easy.

What happened to your shoulder?

What do you think?

His father shook his head and clapped his back. Then he turned and went up the drive where the Ram was parked, the back open, grocery bags in the hatch.

He took the few his father couldn't get and followed his father into the house. Dust along the baseboards, thick in the corners. No carpets, no rugs. In the middle of the living room was a recliner and a glass-top coffee table smeared with fingerprints and coffee rings. A flat screen television hung on the wall in front of the chair. In the kitchen there were plates in the sink in an inch of oily brown water and the counter was littered with bread ties and empty packs of Newports. Another smaller flat screen on the far wall facing the breakfast bar. His father was putting things away, bent in the fridge.

Going for the uni-bomber look, said Gene. It's good.

The what?

Nothing.

When did you get back?

About a week. Mom didn't want me to come. Neither did Rich.

How are they?

Sick and crazy respectively. And broke. We're stone cold poor, dad. I need to ask for a loan.

Donation would be better.

Is Rich living in the hospital still?

Same as last time.

Then he's paid for.

John's closed. I just got back. We're losing the house.

His father straightened and unpacked the last of the shopping bags. Packs of steaks, a pound of chopmeat in clear plastic wrap, a pack of chicken drumsticks. He dumped them in the freezer and ran the tap hot.

His father said, I know the last time we talked we didn't get on so well, but this isn't the way to talk about this.

You mind if I smoke.

No, go ahead, his father said. He took an ashtray down from a cabinet.

You quit?

Down to a pack a day. Reds. Jesus.

That's what Rich said, by the way.

Calms you down, doesn't it? I said it would.

I know what you said.

His father washed his hands and dried them on a towel hanging from a cabinet handle. Then he scratched under his hat and said, Don't use that tone. I'm happy to see you. Let's not have Rich style conversation. If you're mad, just say it.

Can you give me the money or not?

I've got to go to the bathroom and then I need your help with something. Make yourself at

home.

His father went down the hall and shut the bathroom door. Gene went down the hall and poked his head in the rooms. There was a guest room without furniture. The blinds were open and the gray light came through in long bars across the floor and so much dust on the window sill it looked furry. The next room was his father's. The bed was made, the blankets pulled tight and neat across the sheets, the pillow case uncreased. Not a corner out of place. His father's shoes were under the bed, the toes just visible. He went to the dresser and picked up the photograph on top. It was the three of them on one of their last winter hunting trips out at Kirby's Corner. Him eleven, Rich seventeen, almost eighteen, holding their rifles and smiling into the camera. Each had a boot up on the body of the deer lying before them, posed at the edge of a copse of pine blanketed with snow. The mountains running behind them like a jagged scar across the horizon. The faces, Rich, his father. They had the same chin, the same nose. Gene the only one smiling.

He opened the foot locker at the foot of his father's bed. The pistols were in neat rows with the ammunition beside them, the cleaning kits off to the side. The smell of gun oil overpowering. The flag, folded, whose he didn't know. Dog tags, his father's and others'. Photographs in leather vellum, envelopes stamped Army Rangers. A case containing his father's gold leaf rank pin. Major, Army Rangers. Another with his medals. The Purple Heart, Army Good Conduct, Bronze Star, Vietnam Service.

Mattie had nailed it a long time ago. It was all the wars and fighting that hollowed him out. First Vietnam. Then Lebanon, Zaire, Iran, El Salvador, Grenada, Bolivia. Army Rangers since Sixty-Eight in Cambodia and he'd never taken a desk job no matter how much he and Mattie fought about it. He was good at what he did. The Army was a constant. So was the fighting, the survival. He'd told them the same thing every hunting trip and every year the stories got worse. A man whose throat he'd cut. A woman he'd shot through the eye. A little girl that he'd grenaded by accident and that he swore

to God, looking at her shattered corpse lying in the rubble, he felt nothing for. Nothing. His advice was to calm down and face facts: people die. That's the other constant. The variable was how and why. Gene shut the box and the locker and sat down in the kitchen to wait.

The toilet flushed and tap ran. His father came out and put on his heavy coat and Gene followed him out into the garage. His father took down the wood axe, unsheathed it and passed it to him.

I've got shit to do.

I need your help. It'll only take a few hours.

Gene locked the axe in the vice grip and started filing a quarter inch out from the bit, six strokes per side until he could check it against the glove and feel the catch. He flipped the file over to the smooth side and cleared the shavings away. Then he took the stone his father set on the bench and honed the bit. He checked it again. Good and sharp. His father honed the hand axe on the edge of the bench and took down the sled from the wall and they went out the side door.

The snow held in wet drift. North over the trees the sky was dark and gray, the clouds thick whorls. The sled rails cut lines into the snow behind his father.

I don't get to see you much, his father said ahead of him.

That's not my fault.

As much as mine. Don't kid yourself.

The yard abutted a dense copse of trees. He didn't ask himself what he was doing. He simply nodded when his father pointed at the small felled tree, set his feet, and swung the axe. The bit caught in the branch and a barb of pain dug into his shoulder. He freed the axe and swung again. The branch fell into the snow with a crack, held by fibers. The pain slithered down to his elbow. Breath misting in the cold. Force, torque. The muscles in his side burned, his legs shook.

His father stood the sled against a tree and started quartering the cut branches, hewing the bark.

He said, How much with the house?

It's already in foreclosure.

I know but how much? How much do you need to move or whatever?

Five hundred give or take.

His father nodded and backed away from the tree.

Gene swung. A thick branch dropped, syrupy sap trickling from the center. The smell of the pine hung heavy.

He won't see me, said his father. Or take my calls.

Why should he?

I wanted him to get help.

You threw him out.

Gene, we could have been charged with harboring a fugitive.

Don't shit me. That wasn't it. You didn't like the fact that he bucked the trend.

Rich and I disagree on many levels. We have for a long time.

Because you railroaded him. What did you want from him, Dad? You've been pushing us to go into the military since before we could walk. So he went. So did I. And he saw some shit he couldn't handle seeing, big deal.

He went AWOL on active duty. That's not bucking the trend, Gene. I wanted him to get help and turn himself in. He refused to do either. What was I supposed to do?

Fuck, I don't know. Be his father. Take care of him.

I couldn't.

Yes you could have. Mattie did.

I couldn't. Do you remember how he shook at the dinner table? For God's sake, he was genuinely sick.

He was scared.

Of what?

You don't get it, said Gene. He only went in because of you. Do you think he would have gone if you hadn't pushed him? He could have gone to college. He had scholarships and he threw them away because you told him to.

You're putting words in my mouth.

Think careful. You got two sons and an ex-wife and two out of three won't talk to you. He tossed the cleared branches onto the sled and kicked the stripped needles into the snow and said, I'll put it in focus. That Christmas, Rich knew what he was doing. He knew he was about to fuck with your whole plan for him and he knew what would happen and he did it anyway. That's more guts than I've ever had.

His father squatted in the snow, breath steaming. He said, I never had a plan.

Well, said Gene. He dropped the last few branches on the sled and said, We both know that's bullshit.

They worked in silence splitting the trunk. He set the wedges in the trunk and picked up the sledgehammer and drove them into the hard wood of the trunk. The pain slid lower, heavier. Wood and bark split with a hissing crack and the two halves of the trunk fell apart. His father followed behind, pulling the wedges and hacking the seam open.

They quartered a section of trunk and loaded the sled. His shoulder was on fire, his face burnt with cold. His father took one end of the tethers and Gene took the other and they dragged the sled back through the snow and stacked the cords in the wood shed. His father locked it and they went back in through the side door.

Who shot you? asked his father.

American.

M sixteen?

M four.

Through the door the daylight was almost gone. The clouds had slid off to the south, lost themselves over town. The pain had slid out of his arm and back into his shoulder. It knotted behind the shoulder blade, pinched with every breath. He wiped the axes down and hung them back up. T

His father stood in the doorway, face serious. He said, Barn owl.

Gene went and looked. The owl was perched in a Pin Oak, stark white against the leaves, staring down at them. Black eyes set deep in the round face.

His father stepped out and lit a cigarette, offered one to Gene.

He took it and let his father light it, stared back at the owl. All around it the leaves bristling in the wind and it sitting there, unmoving, feathers plumped.

You want to stay for dinner? his father asked.

Gene kicked the snow off his boots and shook his head.

You can, you know.

Dad, Gene said. He looked at him.

He finished his cigarette standing in the snow, looking up at the owl. The owl stared back, still and silent.

They went in. His father went into his room and came out with his checkbook.

I don't have the five, his father said.

Of course you don't. It's just you on a Major's pension.

Don't get smart.

Which part didn't you hear? The part about losing the house, taking care of Rich? Mom sick?

I can write it for two hundred, take it or leave it.

I don't have a choice.

His father wrote the check and tore it out and gave it to him. He said, I'm glad you came. You stop over whenever you want. I mean it.

On second thought, said Gene.

He crumpled the check and threw it in sink. It soaked through dark, floating on the oily surface.

Gene.

Not doing this, Dad.

Gene, hold on.

He slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 12

He'd done what he was told. At first and later. He'd never looked back.

He was like the hunter, Orion: pin pricks of light collected in a great dark mass. Surrounded and inhabited. A hunter lost in a landscape at the same time too high and airless, too bright, too dark.

The highway through the frosted window stretching black beyond the glare of his headlights. The night sky clear and cloudless except at the edges. The edge of the sword just a string of silver dots, the legs, the arms. The head and the hounds and they prey. The lion or the hare, Taurus or Lepus, depending. Kneeling in the night and ready to strike, arm raised. Waiting.

He thought what they had in common was that tension. The finger on the trigger, ready to squeeze, the sword ready to drop. The difference was execution. Orion stood waiting, ready. He'd given the killing stroke. It was a matter of follow-through, of forward motion. Making thought and fear reality.

That was the thing. In the hospital bed he'd looked into the face of the Lieutenant put in charge

of his case and realized that the answers—the whole thing—had been in his head as much as it had been real. They blew away, empty husks.

What did you think you were doing? the Lieutenant had asked. Then he'd showed Gene the photos and said, Look. Look at these. Why did you do this? Gene made himself look. He hoped there would be an answer in the pictures, something to answer the Lieutenant's question, his own question in retrospect. But all there was were bodies facedown in ditches. Corpses stacked in houses. Cars and trucks burned, horses shot. The Lieutenant said, We got a dead soldier with your bullet in his brain. We pulled his bullet out of your shoulder. Mexican standoff style in the middle of fucking Tal Afar. And we know about what you did. We know about you robbing checkpoint, about you searching homes and stealing. We know about you killing those POWs. And the civvies. Killing goddamn civvies. So you pick your words careful and you answer my question.

Gene had did what he was told. He closed his eyes and tried to figure out how to put it: burn. Burn every motherfucker and then and then only could he get out of that bed and walk down the street and not be afraid of getting shot at. Because he'd gotten greedy and lost in the rush, the adrenaline, the feeling of security mingled with payback it gave him every time he knelt one of the nameless fuckers in front of him and put the barrel against the back of the fucker's neck and squeezed? Because he hadn't meant to, none of them had, even Hollis, but one night they did it and whether it was an accident or whatever they never said anything about it, and when it happened again it just happened? Because it only happened a couple of times, ten of fifteen POWs at most? A few civvies? Wasn't this collateral damage? It wasn't, was it? Wasn't this payback? Fear? Wasn't this just the adrenaline and the combat fatigue and the heat and the thirst and the pressure? Wasn't this just those things made real, flesh and bone and blood splatters and bullet holes in the brick work? Wasn't this just what lay in the wake of cold and terrible fear, hungry and screaming, thrashing from one end of Anbar to the next? No? Well, wasn't this just that he woke up every morning and knew in his heart he was dying, a little at a time?

Wasn't this just the early onset of death? Dismemberment of the soul? Wasn't this just a man falling apart at the seams?

The Lieutenant had looked at him level and closed the file. He'd put the file on his knees and ran a hand over his face like a man that has just seen a dog shit on the carpet. What he told Gene was, Try again.

Gene had said, I don't know.

Try again.

He'd told the Lieutenant, I don't know. I really don't.

And the Lieutenant had said, Try again.

It was the way the Lieutenant had said it that made Gene close his eyes and the tears come and all the words catch in his throat. So he said, Okay, and he told him the truth the best he could. How much they'd made and how far the ring went, what units were in on it and how much shit he was pushing through the ranks and that it had all escalated. Were they fucking scared to die? Another yes. And then he'd feel this knot in his chest, something between exaltation and terror, and he had to laugh a little just to let it out, and maybe crack one of them on the side of the head and watch the blood fall into the sand and sit there like a ruby until it soaked through, because if he hadn't let it out and untied that knot he'd have killed them all, the prisoners, Hollis, Sanchez, all of them. The rest was routine: walk behind a prisoner, Hollis another, pull the clip, check the chamber, and press the barrel against the napes of their necks. Click. And when the prisoner fell to his knees, shaking all over, his hands over his head, he would ask them if they were still scared until he got the answer—yes again—and then he'd say welcome to my world motherfucker, you don't fucking shoot at me, you don't ever fucking shoot at me.

Escalated, the Lieutenant had said. Like it was a word he'd never heard before.

The Lieutenant had said, You cooperate. Really cooperate. Because you're looking at a Court

Martial and worse. What you could face if this goes before a military trial? You could be put away for a long time. A long time. And I'd like to see you put away for the rest of your life. I'd ask for it. I'd move heaven and hell for that. Christmas come early, son. Because you're a piece of shit. You know it and I know it. I don't know what went wrong, whether your mommy didn't love you or you grew up in a ghetto or what the good goddamn fucked you up so bad you thought this was the way to go about things, but I don't care. I'd love to see you take the rap on this. I'd love to see them drag you into court and rattle it off by the numbers and slap you in cuffs and throw you in a hole and clap their hands and be done. I'd love it if you never came out. And that might happen unless you and I cut a deal between you and the Army. Because as much as I'd love to see you get nailed, I have orders. So listen. My orders are to not let this out. This would fuck us. You understand that? This would absolutely fuck us. Brass can't have it unpopular as this war is. We don't need this. The country doesn't need this. So we cut a deal. Here and now. Square. You talk. You tell us everything about everything and every one, you sign saying you'll keep your mouth shut or spend the rest of your life in jail for this, and you never breathe a goddamn word of this. Not a word. Not a peep. You give us that and we'll discharge you. Dishonorable. No jail. Uncle Sam is generous. He'll even let you keep your disability.

That was the moment. That was it. The Lieutenant had held the forms down on the bed table and he'd picked up the pen. That was when he could have fessed up and tell them to shove their deal and maybe in ten or twenty years been able to look himself in the mirror or feel that tweak in his shoulder and not wish he'd bled out back there. Let what come.

But he wrote his name in a shaky scrawl on the line and the Lieutenant took his pen back and that was that. Lying there in the hospital bed he swallowed it and told himself to stop crying. Stop it. Man up. Must have dozed because then he'd woken up and it was dark and the lights were on and his mouth was dry and his shoulder was screaming in pain. There was a copy of the form on the table for him. The moment was gone. The past swallowed. The pill stuck in his throat.

CHAPTER 13

Two blocks down from Brewster's he saw their old pickup pull over to the side of the road and sit there, brake lights glowing red, tail pipe steaming. The driver's window rolled down and Nate leaned out.

You want a ride? Nate called.

Gene jogged up to the truck and got in. It's fucking cold, he said. Then he put his hands out to the vent. You got the heater working?

Nate grinned. Fixed it myself.

My dad got taken by three mechanics on that one.

Shouldn't have bought American.

I got to make a stop over the bridge first. Cool?

Sure. Listen, you hear anything about a kid found all beat to shit out by the river a while back?

Heard about it last May. I think it was a guy in a boat that saw him. Snow had melted.

He was dead?

Wouldn't you be if someone beat you black and left you naked in the snow?

Did you know him?

Nate shrugged. Not really. Some local kid, Army boy. But I know he was working at Brewster's. Why?

Gene settled in the seat and bit at his nails. No reason, he said.

They went over the bridge into west Orion. The traffic thinned and the sidewalks cleared along street after street of boarded up buildings, apartments over stores with red For Rent signs taped in the windows and half the glass smashed out. Whole blocks shuttered and dead, the streets riddled with so

many pot holes it looked like the place had been shelled. On one corner a traffic light was out, and a car on the left idled up to the stop sign before gunning it through the intersection.

On the next corner an old woman stood carrying plastic grocery bags. The scarf on her head had come unknotted and one end blew wild in the wind. She watched the truck past, her mouth open, and Gene saw the holes in the tops of her mismatched shoes, the glassy stare of her eyes.

You remember Rick Evans? said Nate.

I think so.

He knew your brother. Got to drop off his tool kit.

Gene counted three cop cars in the ten minutes it took them to hit Levering Road, each one racing past, sirens screaming, lights throwing red and blue across the storefronts, over the letter-less motor lodge signs and the boarded up front of St. Giles church. The stained glass windows were gone, busted or taken out, and the rotting gray plywood threw the truck's headlights out across the cracked sidewalk. He looked up to see the steeple and the bell tower, impressive to him as a child, but they were gone, blackened timbers clawing their way up from the holes in the roof tiles, piles of broken columns in the side yard.

Fire two years ago, said Nate. Wind blew it over the bridge.

Is that what hit Dewey? And they haven't done anything about it?

Nate nodded. Fucking shame, he said.

They turned onto a drive climbing a hill and parked in front of a two-story house set on land fenced in by trees. The paint was peeling off the porch posts and the steps were bowed, but the house looked good, no sag in the roof, no broken out windows, and the yard was clear except for a truck parked on the side.

They got out and Nate pulled a metal tool box out of the bed. They went up the porch steps and Gene pressed the bell. A man with a thick brown beard opened the door, a dog beside him.

You want your tools back? Nate asked.

The man nodded and held up a finger. He left and came back a moment later with his coat and hat on and stepped out on the porch.

Rick, this is Gene Temmens, said Nate.

They shook hands.

Temmens? You're Rich's little brother?

Gene nodded.

Oh, wow, said Rick. Goddamn. I went to East High with your brother. I thought you looked familiar. I'm Rick Evans. Tell you what, I got to put this in the shed out back. You guys smoke?

Like chimneys, said Gene.

Then let's take a walk.

Rick took the tool box and led them around the side of the house to the backyard. The trees fell back for what looked like three or four acres of open land, a few tree stumps dotting the ground, a huge stack of firewood under the wood shed. The dog followed them out, a squat husky with ice-blue eyes and curled tail. He followed behind Gene, sniffing the back of his legs.

Hell of a dog, said Gene. He knelt down and let the dog lick his hand.

Malmute-husky mix, said Rick. They don't growl. Just talk.

Can you get him to say something?

Igor, said Rick. Speak.

The dog's ears snapped up and he let out a gravelly oh-whoa-whoa.

Gene laughed. That's his name? Igor?

My wife named him.

He do anything else? Get a job, pay rent?

Shit, said Rick. I wish.

Nate picked up a stick and whipped it out over the clearing. Igor went bounding after it, kicking up snow and clods of dirt.

Gene lit a cigarette. Didn't we used to play baseball together at Diamond Park sometimes?

Rick lit a cigarette of his own and nodded. You and your brother and Phillip Stone, he said.

And, Christ, what was that kid's name? The one with the underbite?

Gene snapped his fingers. Allen Shoop.

Allen Shoop, said Nate, laughing. That kid couldn't hit for shit.

Couldn't pitch for shit, said Rick.

Last pick every time, said Gene.

What was the other kid's name? asked Rick. The one he always brought with him? Danny something?

Igor came trotting back the stick between his teeth. Gene snapped his fingers and took the stick and stood up and said, Danny Mallon, I think.

Igor tensed in front of him, tail curled, tongue hanging. His whole coat was white except for a widening triangle of black down his back, ending in a point at the base of his tail. Gene wound back and threw. The stick arced out over the clearing, lost for a second against the dark gray underbelly of the clouds before it appeared again, a black line flipping end over end, Igor already bounding after it before it touched the snow.

That's him, said Rick. Danny Mallon.

That kid could play ball, said Nate.

Rick opened the shed and set the tool box down. We only let Allen play because he brought Danny. Did you know he went pro?

Danny? asked Gene.

Minor leagues, Rick said, but he was doing great. Then he got picked up by the Giants. He was

with them a year, I think, and he got traded to the Astros.

Is he still playing?

Rick shook his head. Tore something in his knee, I think, and sat the bench for the rest of the season.

Elbow, said Nate.

Was it his elbow?

Nate pointed to his right elbow.

Well, said Rick. He quit. Couldn't play anymore.

Just a tear? said Gene. He took the stick from Igor and ran his hand over the dog's head. The fur around his ears was soft as down but around his neck and on top of his head the coat was long and bristly and thick. He threw the stick again and said, You can go back after a tear.

He didn't, said Rick. That's what happens. I was driving trucks for ten years and then I pulled a disk in my back. Now I can't sit in one place for more than an hour.

Yeah, but a disk is one thing. A tear is something different.

You ever tear anything? Nate snickered.

Fuck tear, I got shot.

No shit? said Rick.

Gene patted his left shoulder.

I'm not complaining, said Rick. I miss working, but I got workman's comp at least. I can't complain. How's your brother? I heard he went into Army after high school. Didn't he go to into the Gulf?

Gene nodded, staring out over the field. Igor was digging at the ground, nosing through the snow.

Christ. What is he now? A Lieutenant Colonel or something?

Gene shook his head and reached out for the dog. Igor sniffed his hand and licked it, then came over and sniffed his leg. Retired, he said.

Ten years in and retired?

Retired as in he went crazy.

Rick blew out smoke. You shitting me?

Nope. He's all right, I mean, he's not running around screaming or anything. He has Gulf War Syndrome and a few other things, but he's basically all right.

They smoked in silence a while, staring out over the darkening clearing. Igor moved across the clearing and stood at the edge of the trees, looking back at them, the stick forgotten. Then he put his nose to the ground and started moving along the tree line, padding where the snow met the shadow of the overhanging branches. A light came on behind them, throwing a rectangle of yellow across the navy-blue tinged snow. Gene looked over his shoulder. A lamp in an upstairs window.

Then Rick said, Your brother was a good ball player, though. I remember this game we were playing, we were sixteen or so. You remember? We went out to Diamond and it was cold as hell that day, sometime in Novemeber, and the snow was already coming down. Just us and Allen and Danny and a few of the other kids, five man teams, and they got Danny and it was me and you and your brother and Allen one other kid, Greg something.

Greg Perdue, said Nate.

Were you there? asked Rick.

First base.

That's right, you were. Anyway, Allen was madder than hell that he didn't get on the same team with Danny. You remember this? It was, I think the fifth or sixth inning and Allen was being an asshole and struck out and your brother said he'd done it on purpose. I mean, we all knew he did it. He was pissed because he wasn't on Danny's team and he fucked with us whenever that happened. He was

such a little asshole.

I hated that kid, said Nate.

They laughed.

You were eight or nine, Rick said to Gene, and you could hit better than Allen.

Everyone hit better than Alan.

Amen. So, what happened was your brother went up to Allen and called him on it: you struck out on purpose, you faggot, da-da-da-da-da, dead serious. I think he'd had enough of Allen pulling that shit, and Allen, that retard starts talking shit back at your brother. Right? Rich is like a foot taller than Allen and he's talking shit at him because he figures, fuck it, Danny's his friend and nobody's bigger than Danny. And Danny comes running over and gets between them and starts shouting: if you touch him I'll kick your ass. You remember? If you so much as touch him I'll kick your ass. And remember, Danny's about a year older than your brother and bigger.

Way bigger, said Nate.

He was a big kid, said Rick. Tough kid. I never saw anybody kick Danny's ass the whole time I knew him, so I'm thinking, oh shit, just let it go, Rich, because usually if we just bitched enough Allen would quit and go home and then Danny would stay and finish the game. He wasn't a bad guy when Allen wasn't around. He was actually pretty cool. But he didn't let anyone pick on Allen, and he was serious about it, you could tell. He was giving your brother the look like, do it, dude, and I'll break your jaw, and no offense to Rich, but I think Danny could have done it. I never really saw your brother fight, so I don't know. But I'll never forget this part: Rich looks Danny in the eye like, all right, you said your piece, turns around and socks Allen in the jaw. Point blank. Drops him. Blood coming out of Allen's mouth, dude's wailing and screaming, and Rich turns around and looks right back at Danny and doesn't say a word. Not a word. Just looks at him like a little Clint Eastwood like, there you go, you said your piece, now I said mine, what are you going to do? and I thought your brother was dead. I

thought we were going to have to dog pile Danny just to get him off your brother, but then Danny's just standing there looking at him, and the thing I remember—I don't know what Rich was doing.

He was just staring back, said Nate.

Was he? All right, so, he's staring back, but I remember looking at Danny's hands balled up into fists and thinking, oh shit, oh fuck, Rich is dead, Danny's going to pound him, so I drop my glove and start going over and then Danny just walks around Rich and picks up Allen. That's it. He picks up Shoop, and that kid's face is still bloody as hell, and he's looking at Danny like what the fuck, dude? and they just walk off the field and go home. That was it. They just went home.

They were silent again, staring over the field now dark, the trees lost to all but the edge of the lamp's light, the sky gone from gray to black and the stars and moon lost somewhere behind the clouds. Gene could hear but not see Igor crunching through the snow somewhere just beyond the light, and the hair on the back of his neck went up. If he called and the dog didn't come, how would anybody ever find him? The feeling that just past the edge of the light nothing was the same, that whatever crossed over might never find its way back.

Igor, he called. He whistled. He heard the dog stop, the crunch of snow cease, and his heart beat in his ears.

Igor, he called again.

Silence. Then the dog padded into the light, ears up, limp squirrel between his jaws.

Your brother's got balls, said Rick. Was the point of the story. Drop it, Igor.

The dog dropped the squirrel and Rick kicked it over toward the tree line.

Yeah, said Gene. He does.

They went around to the front and Gene told him to come by on Sunday for the moving sale.

Where you moving to?

Don't know yet, said Gene. Around here.

I'll swing by. Tell Rich I said hello.

I will.

They got in the truck. Rick climbed the porch and turned and waved at the door. Gene rolled the window down and waved back, his fingers numb in the cold. The dog was at the base of the steps, half in the light coming from the door.

CHAPTER 14

I got it.

It's heavy. Your desk and Rich's are heavy.

I got it.

You're working overtime tomorrow?

He nodded. He didn't like lying to her. It had been a long time since he'd felt anything about lying to anybody, but it was different with her. She wouldn't want him going up to Cheboygan and he didn't think anything would come of it. Why upset her for nothing?

They were quiet after that. Just the clink of their forks against the plate. After dinner Mattie washed up and Gene went upstairs and called Nate.

Still on for tomorrow?

What time again?

Six.

Christ, said Nate. That's early.

Gene grabbed the phone cord and tried to untwist it, but it kept snapping back.

You have to work anyway, he said.

I know, but it's still early.

See you at six.

Hey. You tell your mom?

Nope, he said. See you tomorrow.

He hung up and started packing. One side of the room was trash. The other he was keeping. He opened his closet. Most of his clothes didn't fit right anyway. He didn't know why except that when he put them on they didn't feel right. Too tight or too big, or the fabric itched against his skin. He'd asked Mattie if she was using different detergent or something, but she'd told him no. Same as always. Something was just off.

Two pairs of jeans, some sweaters, his coats and flannels and a few shirts—mostly undershirts. Three pairs of socks, three pairs of underwear, five pairs of boxers, his long johns, hats, gloves, scarves, and face masks. A pair of sneakers, two pairs of boots. All of that went into two boxes on the keep side.

In the box at the bottom of his closet he found his yearbooks, old paperback novels, torn and creased comics. A few of the letters Rich had sent home while he was away. He'd never written back. Mostly Rich had called, usually late at night. Sometimes he'd hear his father storming out of his room, Mattie behind him, and then they'd be in the kitchen, the light just a strip under his door, and his father shouting into the phone. And sometimes Gene would answer and not say anything and Rich would just talk. He knew it was Gene by the silence. The fear, he'd said. That's what silence is: fear. Rich'd told him how he'd been to the desert and seen the oil fields on fire, like flowers of flame, and then he'd laugh and say listen to me, did you hear what I just said? Isn't it ridiculous? Flowers of flame? But that's what they're like. Or geysers. Spouts going up, up, up, like all of us. We all go up when we die. We go up and we think its a blue sky up there but its not. Its dark and oily and the smoke is so thick we can't see where we're going. We crash into one another. We fall. We rise up and do it all over again.

Then Rich'd cried and Gene listened and still said nothing. There was nothing to say. He'd

known enough to know that Rich didn't want someone to talk back to him. He wanted someone just to listen. Then the calls had stopped. Rich turned himself in, went to prison. Got sick. He got out in three years and the next year he tried to kill himself and when he got out of one hospital he committed himself to another.

Gene dumped everything back in and emptied his desk into the box. All the pieces of paper, old pieces of homework, old letters he'd started and never finished. Dear Rich, Dear Rich. The model planes from the shelf in his closet, the photographs of him and Rich and mom and dad, all of it went in. He taped the box shut and put it on the trash side.

He left the boxes with his clothes open so he could get at them and started dragging his furniture downstairs. Mattie guided him on the stairs and held the door open. He set his desk on the porch beside the dining room hutch and table. His chair went on top and the bookshelves against the wall. He pulled the tarp over it and went back inside.

His hands were numb. He was shaking from the cold. He went upstairs. Rich's door was open. Mattie was sitting on Rich's bed, looking into his open closet. Their rooms were identical, his and Rich's. Same layout, same size. It could have been his room he was looking into, his closet she was staring into, the light a misshapen rectangle on the floor. It could have been him she was thinking about, sitting on the edge of the bed, tears on her face.

Mom, he said.

She wiped her face and picked up a box, set it on the ground, and taped the bottom.

I'll do it, he said. He went to take the box from her.

No.

She turned the box over and started pulling Rich's clothes off hangars.

He opened the drawers to Rich's desk. They were empty. Nothing in the drawers, nothing in his nightstand. He pulled the drawers out and carried the furniture downstairs, first the nightstand, then

the dresser and the desk while Mattie held the door and helped him around the corners, and finally the bed frame. He opened Rich's window and squeezed the tiny twin mattress out. It dropped into the snow and threw up a cloud of white.

He brought it all out onto the porch next to his things and covered it with the tarp, checking to make sure the bricks on the tarp's edges would hold. Under the porch light the furniture looked old, worn. The scratches and knicks in the dining room table showed, the stain on the chairs had faded. His desk top had little holes from where he'd stabbed it with a compass when he was a kid. Rich's had the varnish peeling off. It looked like a pile of cast offs, throw-aways. He didn't think they'd get so much as five hundred if they sold everything.

He went back in and brought the boxes down. The front door was open when he came downstairs. Mattie was standing on the porch under the light, the tarp thrown back, her hand flat on top of Rich's desk.

Come inside, he said.

She shook her head and sucked in a breath. He could see she was trying not to cry.

I don't want you getting sick.

I gave him this desk when he was twelve.

I know, mom. Come inside. It's freezing.

He was a good boy.

She leaned in, both hands flat against the desk top like she could feel something in the wood or tamp something down. She rocked back and forth, crying.

Come on, he said.

Why did you do it to him? she asked.

He set the bricks on the tarp and pulled it tight. Do what?

Why did you hurt him like that? Why did you take your father's side when he threw him out?

He was your brother. Didn't you understand that? He was your *brother*.

He edged around the furniture and pulled the tarp back over it all. He slid the brick onto the corner with his foot and pulled the tarp tight under it.

You don't even know, do you? she said.

Mom, can we not talk about this?

That's what we do. We never talk about it.

What was he supposed to tell her? Yeah, she was right. It was all fucked up. Rich was his brother, a good kid, never did anything but look out for Gene and try to steer him right whenever Gene started veering wrong. But bad shit happens to good people everyday. What he'd thought while he was over in Iraq was: that's life. Saying sorry didn't fix things. Saying he'd been an asshole wasn't going to uncrazy his brother, bring him home, save the house, blah-blah-fucking blah. Sometimes shit just spiraled out of control and there's no way back to the outside.

Let's go in, he said.

He reached for her but she pulled her arm away. She looked deflated, small, all the life gone out of her. Her face and hands were gray in the porch light, her eyes black. She wiped the tears off her cheeks and started saying something, but it trailed off into nothing. She went in.

He shut the door behind them.

He got up in the morning like usual, dressed and showered and listened at her door. No noise. He opened it a crack. She was sleeping on her side, her face turned toward the window. The faint bit of light from town that crept through the trees showed on her face, enough to see the lines like scars dug into the skin. He listened. Her breath came raspy and thick.

He shut the door quietly and went downstairs. He made coffee and called Nate.

You up?

Oh God it's morning.

I'm heading your way.

Meet me on the corner of Fenn and Main.

He hung up and poured the boiling coffee into the thermos he'd dug out of the cupboard. Then he put on his coat and gloves and hat and went out.

It was still dark out. Would be until around seven or seven thirty, and then the sun if it even came out would be a blot of brighter gray in a monochrome sky. He cut through the pines around the property and went along the river bank. The wind came off the water and cut at his face. His lips had been chapped since he'd come home. They'd been chapped in the desert. He couldn't remember a time they weren't.

From the bridge he heard the low rumble of traffic. A truck horn blasted and someone yelled. Then he saw something in the water and stopped.

It was the stuffed squirrel from the night before, bobbing against the shore, tangled up with some string and the soggy bits of a fast food bag. He dug a stick out of the snow and fished the squirrel out. More of the stuffing was gone so that the body just sagged. One of the legs had been torn half off, the stitching frayed. He tried to flick it off the end of the stick but it was snagged and hanging by the string. He threw the stick in and started along the bank, looking for carcasses.

Funny how he prayed not to find the gray when he'd never given a shit over the dead in Iraq. They'd bothered him in the beginning—his first kill was still vivid, clear. A man with a brown cloth wound around his face and head, dark eyes looking out over the barrel of an AK. He remembered the guy was wearing sneakers and he'd wondered where the guy had gotten a pair of black Chuck Taylor high tops. He'd asked Hollis and Hollis just shrugged. Shit gets around, he'd told Gene. Probably got it off the dead. And Gene had thought about that, how the things the dead left behind got into the hands of the living. How things were buried but never left behind. He'd heard of packs of scavengers digging

up insurgent gravesites and looting the bodies. Taking ammo belts, magazines, guns—all empty or broken, but still worth something somewhere to someone. Then Gene had seen the kids with portable CD players and cell phones and GPS trackers that they'd just carry around in their hands and offer to sell to the Americans. Five dolla. Five dolla good GPS. Kids wearing one Nike, one dress shoe, kids with belts hung with car cigarette lighters, busted antennas, broken walkies, the melted, broken end of an M4 barrel. One kid had a necklace made of seven six-two casings. The brass tubes clinked when he walked. But those goddamn Chuck Taylors like some yahoo from home. That stuck in his mind. He remembered looking down at the dude and thinking he might have gone to school with the guy. He might have liked him and did a science project with him or smoked a joint with him under the football bleachers where they could look up and see the rust in the joints and talk about nothing but bullshit for two or three hours. Or he might have hated the guy, maybe fucked the dude's girlfriend or stolen something from his car when the guy parked on Fenn and left his window down. They might have graduated in the same year and gone to the same lackluster graduation with the sagging banners and deflated balloons and watered down punch that left red on his teeth. They might have posed for the same class pictures and had their names jammed under the photo in font too small to read. Gene Edwin Temmens. Blank Blank. He remembered thinking that if he'd accidentally killed someone from home he'd have to go back and tell the dude's family. He'd have to ring their bell and stand on the porch in his Army best and tell the guy's mom that he was sorry but he'd shot and killed their son. But here. Then he'd hold out his hand. And there pinched between his fingers would be the Chucks. Black ones with the white logo.

Then Hollis had come over and nudged him and said move out. Gene'd looked down and didn't recognize the face. It wasn't some dude from home. It was some Iraqi with a thick black beard and a scar over one eye and the pupil milky white beneath it. It was an Iraqi with a red scar wrapped around his neck and holes in his shirt and his pants tearing at the seam and shit leaking out of him. And blood.

He was just some guy that he'd shot and watched fall like nothing. No way to describe it. Like a man falling because he'd been shot.

The ice broke up on the sand closer to town and the bank muddied. There were paw prints punched into the snow. He kept expecting to walk just a little further downriver, closer to the sounds of traffic and the smells of the town, and see the gray fur matted and dark in the water, the teeth bared, rolled back black eyes.

Then he stopped. In the wilted stalks of reeds a dog was floating on its side, brown and white, its legs curled in stiff against its bodies. The top of its head was caved in. Blood and bits of bone matted the fur. He exhaled. Not the gray. Not yet.

His alarm went off at six. He smacked it off and blinked. The room was dark with a whisper of gray along the window's edge and the bottom floorboard. He threw the blankets off and shivered. The heat was off again. The floorboards were freezing under his feet. His whole body hurt from yesterday. Last night's dinner sat in his stomach like a brick. He was hungry regardless.

He showered and dressed and went downstairs to turn on the heat. He went back upstairs and listened at Mattie's door. Quiet. He went downstairs and started breakfast. When the coffee was brewing she came downstairs in her robe with the blanket wrapped around her. Her face was a mess of lines and shadows. She was coughing into a fist.

You don't look good, he said.

I'm fine, she said between rapsing coughs. She sat at the table and he put a plate of eggs and toast in front of her.

Heat was off.

I turned it off before I went to bed.

Pipes could have froze. We can't afford that.

She nodded. He knew she never would have forgotten that before she'd gotten sick. He went over and put his hand on her forehead. She didn't even try to brush it off.

You're warm, she said.

I'm freezing.

He shook his head and bit back what he wanted to say. She'd already heard it, they'd already argued about it. She needed a doctor. She was sick. She was running fevers and coughing and she wasn't getting any better. And she would tell him it was fine. She was all right. She'd been to the doctor and he'd told her it was bronchitis and that she would be all right in a week or two. And round again. Same fight, different day.

He poured the coffee and sat down to eat.

You ready for today? he asked.

She nodded and blew into her cup.

There's a few things left in his closet, she said.

I'll get them.

How was the shift last night?

All right. Slower than I thought.

Is one day off enough? You look beat.

It has to be. What about you? How are you supposed to start at the diner tomorrow if you're sick?

She frowned at him.

He knew better than to push it this early in the morning. He told himself it was just some bug up his ass but that wasn't true. He knew exactly what it was. It was piled under the tarp on the front porch. He was going to shovel the snow off the front and set it out there and people would pull up in their trucks and buy it for a tenth of what it had cost them. And then he'd have to help them load it in

the truck beds and tie it down and come back and watch people dig it out of boxes, paw it, talk about it, ultimately dump it back in and walk away. Like so much junk.

Yes. He knew exactly what it was. So did she. He saw it the way she stared at the stove and blew on her coffee. No name for it, but it was there all the same.

I got to start shoveling, he said. He put his plate in the sink and ran the tap.

Leave the dishes.

He shut the tap and finished his coffee. Poured a second cup and sipped it standing at the sink.

He said, Any rock salt?

In the basement, I think.

He looked at her. Hair pulled into a tangled ponytail. Strands in her eyes. The veins on her hands like dark blue rope wrapped around the delicate bones. She crossed her legs and one slipper dangled from her foot, bobbing. He could see it in her face that she wouldn't cry. Not if they sold all of it or none of it. If one person came or no one. He could see it in the set of her jaw that she'd take their money and smile and nod and shake hands and never show what it meant. Neither would he. He'd learned it from her.

He finished his coffee in two large swallows and left the cup in the sink. He got his coat and gloves and boots and stepped onto the back porch. Everything coated like confectioner's sugar. He crunched down the steps and lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the air. Up here it still smelled good. Not as good as yesterday outside town, but still good. The air smelled clean and cold and sharp, the dense smell of ice and the musk of pine mixed together. The smell of sleeping things, of deep hibernation, waiting to germinate. The sky was blue in patches where the sun burned through the clouds, tinged with gold and ringed with a glint of silver. Gray everywhere else except for the peeling paint on the house. The dark brown, almost black, trunks of the pines. And the dark green needles bowed and frosted with snow.

He listened. Just the wind moving through the trees. Then an engine backfiring in the distance. A dog barking. A door slamming.

He went around to the basement and kicked the ice off the doors with the heel, of his boot and started down the concrete steps. In the dark it smelled musty and wet, colder almost. He pulled on the chain. The bulb flashed and clicked and went out. He tapped the bulb with his fingernail. The filament rattled inside.

He navigated by what gray light came down the steps behind him. At the far end was his father's workbench. He'd stripped it and boxed most everything. A few basic tools he'd kept and set aside upstairs. Beside the stairs he saw the spoked wheels of his old ten speed, Rich's beside it. On the wall was the wood axe. He took that down and threw it up the steps. No fireplace in whatever apartment they were going to. No wood to cut.

He found the bucket of rock salt at the other end, the snow shovel on the wall above it. Beside it on a small extension was a box of screws he missed and two gas cans wedged into the corner under a yellow tarp. He shook the cans and opened the lids and sniffed. Gasoline. Not much, but enough. Enough for what? But he laughed, knowing. Was he serious? It was a crazy idea. But they had nothing to lose.

He carried the salt bucket and shovel upstairs and closed the doors with his foot. No point in locking it. He went around front and sprinkled the salt over the lawn and the drive. Then he set the bucket down and went back inside.

The bathroom door was shut upstairs. He could hear the shower running. He went in the kitchen. The dishes had been washed and were drying in the rack. He picked up the coffee pot and shook it. Enough for one more cup. He poured and called Laura.

Hey, he said. I wake you?

No. Getting ready to go to the diner. What's up?

I forgot.

To call?

Yeah. I'm sorry. I had to go see my dad.

I forgive easy, she said. You're buying next time we go out.

Promise you'll be a cheap date.

Psh. I'm not promising shit. Was it a good visit.

Not particularly. You free later?

Call me or come by. Might be.

He hung up and finished his coffee and washed the cup out. The idea came back to him. It was crazy. Two gas cans, spread it out on the stairs, a little in each room, run a trail down to the basement, a little on the shutters outside, the porch, the vinyl siding. It could work. He smiled and pictured the house in flames, a fireball with him standing in front, empty gas can swinging from his fist. Scratch that. Gas can goes, destroy evidence. Him standing in front of the fireball watching the roof crack open and the columns of smoke come billowing out, watching the windows bust, the glass shards throwing light. Watching the siding peel back, curling black in the fire. He pictured himself leaning forward, a grin on his face, all the tension gone from his body, and lighting the end of a cigarette. Crazy.

He set the cup in the drainboard. The phone rang.

Hey, said Hollis. That sale going on?

About an hour.

Good. I got about ten or twelve of the guys from the shop coming down to clear you out. Say it. Tell me I'm awesome.

Gene bit down and swallowed. He said, You didn't have to.

Bullshit. My back your back kind of thing. Come on, you know how we roll.

I know.

See you in an hour, Temmens. Save me something good.

Got a wood axe with your name on it.

He hung up, Hollis's laughter in his ear. He heard the bathroom door open. He went out into the living room and looked up. Mattie was coming out wrapped in her robe rubbing a towel in her hair.

You don't have to come out if you don't want to, he said.

She stopped on the landing and looked down. She said, What?

If you're not feeling good. Today, I mean.

She smiled at him and went into her room. The door shut. He waited, listening. The cough came. Then the creaking floorboards near her closet.

He went out the front and looked up. The sun had burnt a few more holes in the clouds. The sky was pale powder blue, periwinkle above the trees. The salt had melted some of the snow. He took the shovel and went around the drive and the lawn hacking at the top layer of ice and slashing the snow to break it up. Then he started at the base of the drive and worked his way up, shoulder burning, thighs sore. His forearms ached from the shop and the woodcutting yesterday. His hamstrings groaned.

When he reached the porch he stopped and leaned on the shovel and looked up. Mattie was on the porch, pulling the bricks off the edge of the tarp. She shoved the snow off with her bare hands. Her fingers were blue. Her long gray ponytail trailed out the back of her hat.

He spat and went back to shoveling. Under the bottom crust of ice the driveway was spotted with oil stains. Cracks spider-webbed across the slabs reaching for the edge where concrete met dead grass. Old black tire marks and scratches from years of shoveling snow. Near the wall of the house he uncovered a dead bird, black and frozen, half decayed. It was missing its eyes and a wing. Empty sockets and half its feathers gone. He scooped it in the shovel and tossed it under a tree.

Probably a cat, Mattie said from the porch.

She shook the tarp free and started folding it. He wanted to tell her he had it, go back in the house, he'll take care of things, but the sun was good for her. The cold bad, the sun good. She looked better anyway. She wasn't even coughing.

Be nice to have a few days without snow, she said. We don't get many.

He nodded and shoveled the walkway up to the house. The shovel caught and he upturned a stone and rolled it onto the lawn.

Some of the guys from the shop are coming, Gene said. He bent down and hefted a shovel full. Pain lanced through his shoulder. He said, Should be able to get rid of most everything.

Did we forget anything?

He leaned on the shovel and thought. He said, A few things in Rich's closet.

I'll get them.

Let me. I'm done anyway.

She folded the tarp against her coat and set it on ground and laid the bricks on top. How's your arm?

Hurts, but it's fine.

You want to rest?

Not really.

He leaned the shovel near the front door and looked out over the property. The sun threw bands of gold across the snow, stretched the shadows of the trees.

Mattie touched his arm and said, Let me get them. You start taking things out.

Okay.

She went in and shut the door. He reached under his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow and tugged on the brim. It was stupid trying to spare her things. She'd been going to see Rich at the nut house for years without him. If anyone could handle it she could.

He caught his breath and started taking the furniture out onto the driveway. The dining room table with chairs and the hutch. The living room chairs and bookcases with the books in boxes beside them. Rich's bed frame with box spring and mattress. He lumped them together by room stood back to look. He straightened the bookshelf, adjusted the chairs. It looked like house with invisible walls, worn furniture full of knicks and scratches and missing pieces, the plastic covers torn on the dining room chairs, dust on the shelves. Rich's headboard with the tack holes where he'd pinned up posters as a kid. Gene's desk with spirals he'd drawn on the bottom with black ball-point pen. In the sunlight it all looked cheap and shabby and he was ashamed for missing it. It was so much beat up junk. Sitting there waiting for a ghost family.

Mattie came out and set the last box of Rich's things on top of his bed. Did you put the signs up? she asked.

He shook his head and went back around to the basement and got the signs she'd made during the week. Arrows pointing the way. He took the rubber mallet and went back up the stairs and locked the basement doors behind him. He set a sign at the end of the driveway, then went down the street and set one on the corner and one farther out. A few trucks honked as they passed and he waved. They didn't need much. Mattie'd run an ad in the paper for the weekend for twenty-two dollars. It said the same things as the signs: Moving Sale 228 Hickory Lane Everything goes.

When he got back to the house there were two trucks pulled up in the street. Mattie was talking to a young couple who were looking over Rich's bedroom furniture. Another guy was digging through the boxes set out on the dining room table.

Need any help? Gene asked the guy.

The guy didn't even look up. Ain't you Temmens?

Yeah.

Know me?

Gene looked him over. Don't remember.

The guy turned and smiled over his shoulder and stuck out his hand. Bud Essell, he said. East High? Class of ninety-eight?

Essell, said Gene. He shook Bud's hand. Right. How you doing?

About the same as you, said Bud turning back to the boxes. Any tools up for sale?

Gene pointed to the boxes from the basement and looked over to Mattie. She was standing with her arms folded over her stomach watching the couple circle Rich's bed. The woman reached down and tested the mattress and nodded at her husband. He stood with his hands in his pockets.

These, said Bud. He patted a box and took out his wallet and said, Where you moving to?

That's ten, but the socket set is fifteen.

It's a steal anyway. Where you moving to?

Don't know, said Gene.

You remember Phil Sheron? Played football?

Gene shook his head.

He does real estate in town, said Bud. We're close. I could hook you two up, get you a sweet deal on something.

Are there sweet deals in Orion, bud?

A few. Phil knows them.

That right? Gene said and looked up.

Bud was looking at the house and nodding. Gene didn't remember Bud. He didn't want to. He wanted him off his fucking lawn while it was still his fucking lawn.

You want my number? Bud asked.

You know what? I'm good. We got a place.

I thought you said you didn't.

Thanks for stopping by, said Gene. He started toward down the drive where Hollis was getting out of a truck. There were two more pick-ups behind him with guys from the shop spilling out. He met Hollis halfway up. Hollis shook his head.

Lerne, Gene said.

How's buisness, Temmens.

He waved at the other guys—Llewellyn, Ferguson, Gary, a couple of other guys he couldn't remember their names. He said, Slow so far.

Fix that, said Hollis.

They started up the drive and Mattie waved him over. He left Hollis and the guys rooting around the boxes and went over. The couple were walking back down the drive. Rich's bed was still there.

Who are they? Mattie asked.

Guys from the shop, said Gene. He pointed and said, That's Lerne. I was in squad with him.

That's Hollis? Mattie stared. He doesn't look like I expected.

What did you expect?

She shrugged and said, Meaner.

Didn't sell?

Mattie looked at him and glanced back at the bed. She shook her head.

They wanted it for less, she said.

Well, it's gotta go, he said.

I know, but for twenty bucks? She ran a hand over the headboard.

It's all gotta go or we leave it on the curb.

She nodded and didn't say anything.

Hey, Gene, Ferguson called. He pointed to the hutch.

Gene put a smile on his face and went over. The same went for him. It had to sell. All of it, or they'd have to give it away.

For you? Gene said to Ferguson. Ten.

Ten bucks?

Ten bucks.

Ferguson dropped a ten in Gene's hand and waved Llewellyn over.

Hollis came over sipping from a flask, a grin on his face. He said, Getting rid of a lot of shit, Temmens. What are you keeping if you're getting rid of all this?

Not much, said Gene. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the wind. It whipped back and passed over him. Have to squeeze it into an apartment.

A sedan had pulled up in the street and two women were coming up the drive with a little boy in two. Another truck was pulling in behind them and Gene recognized the driver from the shop. There were two other guys in the cab with him. Bud was heading down the drive, passing the women and the boy and chattering at them as he went.

Listen, said Hollis. You free Wednesday night? I want to go out, you and me and that chick you're with? What's her name? Laura?

Gene looked at him. He hadn't told Hollis he was with anybody. He hadn't told him her name. Nobody knew except Jim and Nate and maybe a couple of people who might have seen them at the bar.

I'll bring Miriam, said Hollis. Do a double date thing. They love that shit. And it will give us a chance to talk.

About what?

Hollis motioned around the drive with the flask and said, About how you might make a little more money and get yourself out of this hole.

House is gone.

Fuck the house. There's lots of houses. There's houses everywhere. I'm talking about greasing things up here, getting in on things, knowing the score. The future's bright, count on that. Don't worry, he said nudging Gene's arm, I told you I'd take care of you, fit you in. I got the perfect spot. I'm off Wednesday night. We'll go out, have a couple of pitchers, and then we'll talk shop. Get you squared away.

Gene looked over to Mattie. She was taking money from Ferguson and the other guys. Lewellyn and Gary were carrying the dining room table down the drive. The chairs were already stacked in the bed of the truck. He could feel Hollis watching him, waiting for a response. He turned back and forced another smile.

Wednesday it is, said Gene. Now you going to buy something or loiter around.

Actually, said Hollis. There's something I want. Come here.

Hollis led him over to Rich's stuff. Gene took a drag and held the smoke in his mouth cool and burning like chalk on his tongue and watched Hollis push aside the boxes and dig the rifle bag out of a pile. He hadn't taken it out of the attic. Mattie must have brought it down.

This is a beaut, said Hollis. He dropped the bag on the bed and lifted the rifle, checked the barrel, looked down the sights, levered the bolt.

Gene watched Hollis's hands move over the rifle. He watched Hollis close an eye as he sighted and smile. He heard the bolt click-clack and saw the dark inside the chamber for a second before Hollis pressed the butt of the worn but polished stock against his shoulder and aimed into the trees. Before he could stop himself he was flicking his cigarette into the snow and grabbing the rifle out of his Hollis's hands and putting it back into the bag.

The fuck? said Hollis.

It's not for sale.

It's in the pile.

Mistake.

Chill, man. Christ. Tell you what, I'll give you fifty.

Not for sale.

Hollis laughed and said, Okay, Temmens, I'll give you a hundred and fifty. Two hundred?

Gene zipped the bag up and turned to face Hollis. It's not for sale, he said.

Two-fifty. You're not going to let it go for two-fifty?

Gene wanted to scream. He shouldered the bag and spoke slowly. Not. For. Sale. You got me?

Hollis nodded and dropped a fifty on Rich's bed and said, Since it's you, I'll let it go. Just chill the fuck out, okay? Gimme the shelves, then. And that bookcase then. Is that for sale at least?

The wind picked up the fifty and blew it into the snow. Dark green against the white skittering under Rich's bed. Gene bent down to get it. He felt his face burning.

I'll help you load it, said Gene.

Hollis peeled off a couple of twenties and stuck them in Gene's hand. He pointed around at things and said, Throw in the table and the night stands and the lamps, too. That enough?

Gene crumpled the money in a fist and shoved it in his pocket. Yeah, he said. That's plenty.