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West by Midwest

Lucas Shepherd
University of New Mexico

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Lucas Shepherd
Candidate

English
Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Daniel Mueller, Chairperson

Julie Shigekuni

Stephen Benz

Kathleen Washburn

WEST BY MIDWEST

by

Lucas Shepherd

B.A., University of Iowa, 2014

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

His family died in a car accident, but the vehicular mayhem of demolition derby still attracts former aircraft mechanic Sid Rivers. Rules of the road change on the track: you *must* crash. In between county fair derbies, Sid hunts for the hit-and-run driver who killed his family, but everything changes the night he gives a ride to the wrong hitchhiker: Eden, a recovering meth addict on the run. With her in tow, Sid must dodge a crucible of crooked cops, ex-football stars, and a taxidermist who doesn't limit his work to the animal kingdom. Just before Sid ditches his troublesome new passenger, he learns she may hold the key to his past. But with everyone gunning for them, will he survive long enough to learn who killed his family? And will the answer help mend his life or cause a deeper spiral? After all, crashing cars is easier than putting them back together... *West by Midwest*, a neo-Western crime thriller, explores regret, guilt, and second chances in a land where war comes second nature and peace must be wrestled to the ground.

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PREFACE

PreRamble

I want to tell the story of Iowa, present tense because the 29th U.S. state is evolving constantly, slowly but surely; third-person limited but not too limited because Indian, French, Spanish, Mennonite, Amish, German, and English are some of the many disparate and historic voices funneled into a land where Grain Belt and Bible Belt overlap, *barely*; small town setting because my best estimation shows nearly one thousand clusters of people spread across ninety-nine counties, and a bird's-eye view always makes me think of a big quilt, patchwork of greens, blues, grains; I want to write a novel that tells the story of the Iowa as I know it, a novel classified under "MidWestern"—because you, Hawkeye State, are neither *Go West* nor *Back East*, you are somewhere in the middle, middling.

Introduction

In August 2016 Christopher Farnsworth published a *New York Post* article titled "I dreamed of being Hemingway, but ended up a pulp fiction writer." Farnsworth admits he has been captivated since youth by paperbacks with hyperbolized covers: musclebound, gun-wielding heroes, mostly men; scarlet-dressed women with plunging necklines, stilt legs, cruel stares, etc. "Some of [the books] were brilliant," he writes, "like Gregory Mcdonald's Fletch novels. Others, like the one about the Nazi embryo children with telekinetic powers—well, not so much." Pulpy, trashy, lowbrow. Even so: "I still learned

something from all of them. I learned how to convey information quickly, how to provoke an emotional response in a reader and how to describe characters and settings.”

Unfortunately I can't trace my writerly origins back that far into my youth. But I've read *Men Without Women* and *The Nick Adams Stories* and *In Our Time* and others and of course I dreamed of being Hemingway...how could I not? Once upon a time I was young, white, male, as hungry as empty space, on an Air Force Base in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Circa 2007: Jack Kevorkian released from prison, Street Sense won the Kentucky Derby, and in Guam I went deep sea fishing and drank too much, and one day walked to the Base Exchange and purchased a Toshiba laptop and declared that I was no longer 2A652, Aerospace Ground Equipment mechanic, Airman First Class Lucas A. Shepherd, but rather something innate that had clawed at my ribcage for many, many, many years: a Real, Actual Writer.

As you might imagine this self-actualization was fairly liberating, and back then I didn't understand certain aspects of creating literature. Like: active voice. Substance over style. That the divide between Literary and Genre was ostensibly as great as the nearby Mariana's Trench. The hell did I care? I just wrote. Under ifit trees, black drongos caw-cawing, coconut crabs scurrying on the beach, F-15s launching full afterburners, I wrote.

Now. It should be noted that what I wrote was some of the worst writing, ever, but the accumulated energy carried me to Iowa City, the University of Iowa, mecca for wannabe writers, or so I reasoned. Post Air Force. Circa 2010. As an undergrad I witnessed the literary/genre arm wrestle, but only as a spectator, and casually accepted the paradigm of literary = steak dinner, genre = junk food. This went on until my junior year, when workshop instructor and UI provost Bennett Sims assigned two readings: the

eponymous story from Wells Tower's collection *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*, and an interview with the same author in *The New Yorker*. The short story was a Vikings period piece as written by Raymond Chandler. First person POV. Gore and noir all rolled into one. Even purposeful anachronisms! Consider the following dialogue:

“My, that sumbitch has got some brass,” he said. (Tower)

Or the “blood eagle” description as performed by the Viking pillagers:

Then he knelt and put his hands into the cuts. He fumbled around in there a second, and then drew Naddod's lungs out through the slits. As Naddod huffed and gasped, the lungs flapped, looking sort of like a pair of wings. I had to turn away myself. It was very grisly stuff. (Tower)

If the short story had me hooked (it did), then the interview landed me in the boat. Tower discusses his writing process: “Fiction is so much harder and scarier to write than nonfiction. It requires an enormous amount of concentration and faith to carve out that little bit of space into which you can insert a world that feels real.” Sure. Even during my undergraduate tenure I understood that some works-in-progress sprang to life while others floundered. But how does that magic happen? “With fiction,” writes Tower, “there's no reason why everything you write shouldn't be amazing. Nobody's stopping you from making up better stuff.” Me, in the boat, gasping for oxygen.

The story said everything I felt about my Air Force experience, even though it was Viking noir. Here the narrator of *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* reflects on his violent lifestyle:

I got an understanding of how terrible love can be. You wish you hated those people, your wife and children, because you know the things the world will do to them, because you have done some of those things yourself. It's crazy-making, yet you cling to them with everything and close your eyes against the rest of it. But still you wake up late at night and lie there listening for the creak and splash of oars, the clank of steel, the sounds of men rowing toward your home. (Tower)

Of course, I had known about consequences since Sunday School: Jesus in Gethsemane, rebuking Peter: "...for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matthew 26:42 KJV)¹. But, like, I *got* it this time, and I finally understood the incredible ugliness I had felt years prior when I brushed my hand across skull decals on the throat of a parked C-130 gunship, or dropped off new-gen heaters outside the drone complex ("Stay warm, fellas! And mind the collateral damage..."), or received as a parting gift a 105 mm howitzer shell from my friend in Ammo, which I keep to this day deep in my closet.

Thus I had my Artistic Defining Moment (ADM): you *can* and probably *should* write about Universal Truths with whatever form plays to your strengths. While Christopher Farnsworth experienced "the beginning of my life in pulp fiction" at a very

¹ The sentiment even predates Jesus Christ by four and half centuries, with Greek mythology's Agamemnon uttering a similar proverb (as recorded by Aeschylus). "By the sword you did your work, and by the sword you die." (line 1558)

young age while reading *The Freckled Shark* (Doc Savage #67), I knew right then, reading Viking noir in the basement of Dey House—the storied Iowa Writers’ Workshop—that I wanted to reconcile the irreconcilable, to meld Genre with Literary, taking only what I truly loved from each world and casting the remnants aside, to foment authentic conversation that included my personal experience, military and beyond, through the Great American Novel.

Or something like that.

Inspirations

“Rip-roaring plot...unforgettable characters and subterranean themes and exquisite sentences” are just a few things author Benjamin Percy appreciates about those writers able to spin a good yarn without sacrificing believability. In a 2015 interview posted by *Poets & Writers*, Percy notes that any kind of label bestowed upon a book is a “phantom barricade”: after all, uppercase Art has always been transcendent, reaching a hand across space and time. Percy offers Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a prime example. “The creature embodies all the anxieties about the industrial revolution,” he notes, but the themes in Shelley’s 1818 epistolary novel echo into our own contemporary milieu with “fear of science and technology and...fear of man playing God,” among other concerns. For Percy, great literature can never sacrifice the immediacy of, as he puts it, a rip-roaring plot.

I’d been following Percy since his second collection of short stories, *Refresh*, *Refresh* (Graywolf, 2007). After I finished his first novel, *The Wilding*, published by the same press in 2010, I contacted the author, hoping to find a copy of his first book. It

seemed like a good idea to trace the roots of a writer I really appreciated—the title story of *Refresh, Refresh* is a great military tale, but the other stories in that collection lean more to the weird, even horror, spectrum. How did this guy get his writing career going? Could I model his genre success? Percy emailed me back a few days later:

Hey, Luke.

Thanks for reading -- and for the kind words. *Language of Elk* is out of print -- I pulled it after having a dispute with the publisher (read: I wasn't getting any royalties). Not sure if I'll pursue another publisher. I don't feel in any rush to: they're just stories I wrote in grad school for my thesis, so I'm not particularly proud of them. I only have ten copies in my closet, so I'm not selling any of them, I'm afraid (not after I saw that they were selling for \$350 online!).

Anyway, I appreciate the interest, but really, they're a bunch of hack stories written by a grad student. *Refresh, Refresh* is a much better book of short fiction.

Hopefully we'll run into each other down the trail.

Ben

As an undergrad, “just stories I wrote in grad school for my thesis,” was a pretty shocking line for me to read. Around this same time I was discovering how difficult it was to score a decent publication—*any* publication, really. And this guy’s just abandoning this stack of short stories? Nothing made sense anymore. But I was about to have another ADM. How many of those are we afforded in this life? No one knows.

“Write a million words,” wrote David Eddings, “the absolute best you can write, then throw it all away and bravely turn your back on what you have written. At that point,

you're ready to begin."² I stumbled onto this quote early in my self-declared writing career—I think I was still on Guam—but for the longest time I used the quote merely as an excuse; so long as I hadn't reached that word count plateau, no stories, poems, or even novels could be considered failures.

Anyway, I'm at Iowa, an undergrad, in that class where I read the Viking noir story by Wells Tower. Up to this point the short stories I submitted for workshops (held in the basement of Dey House) prominently featured the Air Force, but didn't really say much about how I felt re: war, service, patriotism. So I wrote a story about a confused airman who was only sure of one thing, leaving. I left the workshop class awestruck. The provost said if he'd picked up the story in a grad workshop, he wouldn't've blinked. It was really, really good. It also hasn't been published. Anywhere.

But you may have read it. It was called "Borders," and I submitted it as my writing sample to get into the University of New Mexico's MFA program. Oh, before/after my application I sent it out far and wide: Alaska Quarterly, Baltimore Review, Barnstorm, Booth, Bull, Duende, Electric Lit, Ghost Town, Kenyon Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, to name a few. Just never found a home. My theory on this is of course my ADM: all writing serves a purpose, but sometimes that purpose is elusive to its creator. Maybe that's too mystical, I don't know. In any case the short story got me here, and by that yardstick the story has been quite beneficial.

Then came my own grad school stories. They got long...longer...too long. 10,000+ words or, for scale, what *Writer's Digest* considers as half a novella. So I turned to a more ideal form and wrote a paranormal thriller novel about a college radio DJ who

² Both the source of this quotation and its originality are in some contention...other writers thought to have articulated a similar thought about the million word mark are Ray Bradbury and John M. McDonald.

stumbles onto a cold case. *Back to Haunt*. And I cranked that thing out—my keyboard glowed red. 70k words and two revised drafts later, the premise was the only good thing about it. I knew I had two options: double down on my editing process or pitch the whole manuscript and start from scratch. Being a military man, I chose the tactical retreat.

We spent a month in Iowa, my family and I, in June 2015, and I brought along a hard copy of my *Back to Haunt* manuscript. The decision to jettison the book came easy; as I sat under a sugar maple tree outside of Woodburn, binder resting on my lap, red-tailed hawks soaring above, I realized that even *I* didn't want to read the manuscript I'd labored on for so long (every day for about eight months). Why would anyone else? I shelved it.

That night my wife and I hired, gratis, her parents as babysitters while we went out. We drove to the Clarke County Speedway. The roar of engines, the choke of dust, the frenzied crowd...I was hooked. This was the material I'd been born to write. Beer coolers, cigarette smoke, cutoff shorts and NASCAR tank tops . Corn and soybean fields and cattle lowing and God's thumbnail of a Midwest moon and the Milky Way like freckles on the face of every girl I've loved. Just another Saturday night at the racetrack.

Three months later Clarke County Speedway closed for good.

*

“I dynamite the vault and let all my treasure pour out,” writes Benjamin Percy in a *Glimmer Train* essay. “Every story is an ‘all-in’ story.” We’re playing with house money, as writers, yet oftentimes have a tendency to hold back. Save some magic for the next hand. The temptation is palpable: you want to have more than one book published, right? I mean, eventually? Why not a three-book deal for your sci-fi/fantasy trilogy?! For me,

focusing on something with that scope would spread the writing too thin. (I already feel this way about writing one novel.)

At the time of this comps draft an agent is looking over my *West by Midwest* manuscript. An indie press is also interested, but not until after their next big book launch. All the while I am editing, revising, slight changes, polish polish, scrubbing the corners with a toothbrush. That sort of thing. When my wife asked why—why fuss over it, why not just relax and let the powers-that-be make their decisions before you alter anything—my response is that it isn't finished yet. I haven't gone all-in.

*

Learning that the Clarke County Speedway closed for good not long after my inspirational visit filled me with the kind of make-hay-while-the-sun's-shining that I needed. All Percy's talk about vaults and treasures doesn't mean much without a daily regimen of writing, writing, editing, scrapping, writing. In my research I discovered demolition derby was slowly but steadily going extinct: those 80s-style sedans—land yachts—are getting harder to come by. Crowds, less enthusiastic. Promoters few and far between.

It certainly felt as though my time was limited while writing *West by Midwest*. I had to get it finished, now, before it was too late. Maybe that desperation was the same as demolition derby enthusiasts who have lived to see their sport diminish. I don't know. But I could see that this was something worth investing a considerable amount of time in. Even during preliminary, haphazard research, I was hooked, feeling the same way I did that night at the Clarke County Speedway. So I got to work.

Lists & Lessons

“All week, I kept making lists and crossing things off them,” writes Sarah Dessen in her novel *This Lullaby*, “ending each day with a sense of great accomplishment eclipsed only by complete and total exhaustion.” When I begin a lesson plan that ends with a good-sized writing assignment, I have my students make lists. I do this too in my own writing. It’s important to see what’s at your disposal, potential ideas you can work into your text. Since my story was set in Iowa while I sojourned in the Southwest, I knew I needed a list of flora: foxtail grass, sawgrass, holy grass, hog millet, arrow wood bushes, blackberry briars, hills yellowed by dandelions, the perfume of honeysuckle on a humid June morning. That sort of thing. Fauna as well: possums, skunks, coyotes, bats, whitetail deer, turkey buzzards V-ing the sky, katydids snapping from grass spear to cattail, hog and cattle confinement buildings that reek of manure and death. Etc.

I made exhaustive lists of all things Wild Iowa and did my best to plug them in at appropriate junctures, hopefully enriching the locale the way I feel Smith Henderson does with 1980s Montana in *Fourth of July Creek* or how artsy Taos and fly-fishing Colorado comes alive in Peter Heller’s *The Painter* or the way North Carthage, Missouri is its own character in *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. Ever since Adam in the Old Testament’s creation myth: that’s how long we have wanted to name things. A pretty long time, plus after reading the aforementioned and similar novels I understood how “three meadowlarks in manna grass” painted a better picture than “some birds in a field.”³

³ A bonus: flora and fauna became a motif of sorts, when I realized all the female characters have nature names (Eden, Meadow, Wendy) and things like manna grass could serve as a perfect parallel to the Grain Belt/Bible Belt overlap that buckles southern Iowa. (Manna being the sustenance God provided the Israelites as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land; corn and soybean fields being ubiquitous as grass.)

But the list that proved most important was my litany of Western film tropes. I grew up on films about the untamed American West, from Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name* to Gene Autry's *Singing Cowboy* to John Wayne's...well, everything. John Wayne—Marion Morrison back in the day—was born in Winterset, Iowa, not far from where my novel is set. Strangely, it was yet another way to incorporate the Bible into *West by Midwest*: David and Goliath was the quick draw/duel that I had seen in countless cowboy flicks; Daniel in the lion's den was the hero's death and rebirth, just like Clint Eastwood when he recovers from a savage beating in a cave in *A Fistful of Dollars*; Abraham's meet-cute with his wife, when he saved her from less-than-scrupulous men at a well—the public access well acting as an Old Testament saloon where, as we have learned from Old West tropes, confrontations happen on a daily basis.

Naturally some of the tropes had to be updated. Horses became derby cars. The U.S. Calvary, the Air Force. Riding off into the sunset...in a crop duster. But all these things made me realize the intuitiveness of transforming the Western into a MidWestern; a modern day tale that, as I state in my query letter, is Jack Reacher meets John Wayne on the demolition derby circuit. In a sense it was low-hanging fruit, when we still had coal trains crisscrossing our state and men packing revolvers and sheriffs who wore sweat-stained Stetsons.

Lists first became a way I could ensure I was going all-in, as I discussed in the previous section. It felt like something was being accomplished, like Sarah Dessen wrote, and if “complete and total exhaustion” came after ticking off all the boxes, my Midwest work ethic gave me a pat on the back. But over time I realized the true value of having those columns before me: I began to recognize a pattern. Everything I wanted to write

about (small towns, Midwest, loss, redemption, hope) was embedded in the fabric of my setting. An ADM for sure, and from the list-making and box-checking came a confidence that sustained my writing from once upon a time to happily ever after.

However, as helpful as all the list-making would prove to be, at the end of the day they were only columns of information. The three fiction workshops I attended each, in their own way, helped immensely with the completion of my dissertation. In Julie Shigekuni's class—this was my first semester at UNM—we did a class exercise that showed how stories have natural middles and ends. From what I recall, she began with the first sentence and had each student, arranged in a circle, imagine what happened next. The trick being that no one knew what anyone else had written down. Looking back after teaching five semesters, it seemed like one of those in-class assignments that could easily go awry. After everyone finished writing, we read through the story, going around the room in the assigned order. The story had an ending with the final student, which wasn't too surprising (since they knew they'd be last), but to our surprise it had found a natural, organic middle...written by the student seated halfway through the circle.

This was especially useful since I've never been a great plotter. I begin with an idea, an inkling of where I want the story to go, but then I take the leap of faith. I wanted *West by Midwest* to be a *Siddhartha* of sorts (hence the protagonist's name: Sid), but Julie was right: the Story has agency and goes where it needs. As I wrote and, more importantly, rewrote, the story found its natural, organic middle: Sid, protecting a mother and son on the run at his old military friend's farmhouse, thinks he has a shot at peace and domestic bliss, but a run-in with two angry young men outside a gas station reminds

him that war comes easily while peace must be wrestled to the ground. He is presented a choice: turn and run or face the music.

My next workshop, taught by Dan Mueller, came at just the right time. Concerned with patterns of allegory, symbols, themes, and motifs in *West by Midwest*, I sensed that the novel was at something of a stalemate. What did it all *mean*? Did it matter? Dan encouraged students to “write from the bottom up,” to start from a basic sentence level and focus on meaning, sense, and clarity.

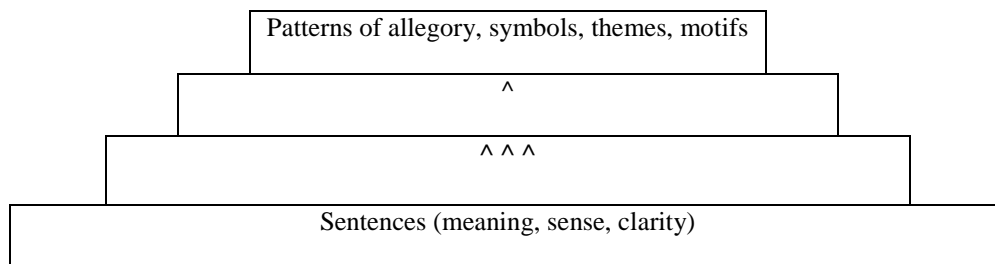


Fig. 1: The author's best attempt at recreating Dan Mueller's Bottom Up illustration

This, of course, is Architecture 101. Yet perhaps as wordsmiths we abandon our sentence roots for conceptual designs that ooh and ahh. It happened to me while writing my first novel, *Back to Haunt*; I tried to force a parable into it. Round peg, square hole. Just didn't fit. Same thing with the new manuscript too. Dan's lesson alleviated my constant fussiness for the novel-in-progress to have high-minded, philosophical weightiness and allowed me to focus on what really matters in any story: the words. One after another, stacked together until they reach the middle, then the end. The subsequent fiction workshops, first by Julie and then Dan, somehow built off each other and helped me understand the best, simplest way to put a writing project together.

Finally, I attended a workshop taught by visiting professor Lori Ostlund. By this time the book was “completed,” which is to say it had reached some closure at the end. Lori had each workshopper read a section of their work prior to critique. As I read from chapter two, which introduces the female lead, Eden, she stopped me. Hold it right there. I’m sorry, she said, but can you not use that *noir* voice? At the time, I was perplexed. In retrospect, I had been channeling Jack Kerouac reading *On the Road* while appearing on The Steve Allen Show (complete with piano playing in the background, smoke roiling in the air; do yourself a favor and look it up).

It was a humorous moment (Lori is pretty non-confrontational) and made me self-conscious for the rest of the reading, but soon after I realized that the third-person “voice” narrating Eden’s sections was forgoing any sense of femininity for a cigar-chomping dames-and-dolls tough guy voice. That chapter (and subsequent chapters) were aided by Lori’s somewhat incidental comment. Maybe that’s what the best teachers are able to do: unwittingly help their students. In the time I have left at UNM, I would like to work on Eden’s sections with a more careful ear to her thought and speech patterns.

Oddly enough, if the manuscript were written in first-person POV, a lot of attention and even critique would shine on the female sections, but, at least from my perspective, it isn’t really *that* different. Maybe the trouble originated when I assumed that third-person POV shelters a male writer from most (if not all) criticism of a female character. But the more I understand Eden’s character, the more I realize she works as a foil for the warmongering men in the novel. As she makes the connection from plastic army men to guns and the “boys will be boys” attitude that excuses or even condones awful behavior, she takes to heart this line from a Langston Hughes poem: “To think is

much against the will.” If Sid can find peace in the world, either in the West or Midwest, Eden and her femininity must be a part of it, and that is why rendering her character needs a delicate authorial touch. I believe it was Calvin from *Calvin & Hobbes* who once said, “War is a manly art.”



Fig. 2: Calvin & Hobbes by Bill Watterson

The Manly Art

Even Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Robber Bride*, set in 1990s Canada, has something to say about armed conflict: “War is what happens when language fails.” In a line from one of my favorite poems, Vietnam-era, a man tells Rachel Sherwood, “it’s the only thing/ that keeps us busy.” Tolstoy wrote the book on it. Robert Heinlein took some of his experiences in the U.S. Naval Academy and turned it into *Starship Troopers*. The epic poems that linger from Ancient Greece. More recently, T. Geronimo Johnson’s *Hold It ’Til It Hurts*, a novel about “an ex-soldier seeking to reconcile his own conflicting emotions about war, family, and race” (Joanne Wilkinson).

In short, a lot has been written about war.

West by Midwest begins and ends with an image, one that articulates the way I feel about war. Post-military Sid can never go back to the way he was before the war; his

experiences, though ostensibly minor, changed him forever. Consequences. The idea that war affects more than combat veterans is one I've not observed in those books that seem to define modern-day warfare. The military men in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* have seen the abyss, felt it staring back, and returned and attempted to tell their stories.

In a way I understand why we gravitate toward these tales. The trenches, the blood and guts, the battle of morality waged within oneself: *could I kill a man if it came down to him versus me?* But maybe this is the narrative we seek out because it is the easiest to understand. I'm far more interested in the psychological ramifications of all the other enlisted personnel. The non-combat veterans like myself. Consider: data collected from the Pentagon from 2008-2011 "shows that 52 percent of military suicides were committed by active-duty service members who had never been in combat" (Los Angeles Times). So—more than half. That's a pretty big problem that, from my perspective, is completely absent from the cultural radar, perhaps because on the surface it seems so understandable.

Consider Benjamin Percy's debut novel, *The Wilding*, which features as a secondary character Iraq veteran Brian. Injured from his most recent tour, Brian spends his free time watching daytime television, working out, wearing an animal suit that he taxidermied from various animals, and stalking the protagonist's estranged wife, Karen. Representation is good, but here the veteran is presented as an Other—Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Clearly Percy is commenting on the beast within us, but the Cro-Magnon vibe given off by Brian isn't exactly a flattering portrait. Too many times

the veteran is a set piece, a back drop, either a macho man (the Jack Reacher series) or a crazed man (whether adept, as in *Heart of Darkness*, or inept, like Percy's Brian).

“[Brian's] hidden nature has been suddenly revealed,” we learn near the end (Percy 246). At this point Brian has proven himself completely incompetent at every aspect of his life, including being super creepy: while slinking around he passed out, due to his head injury, in Karen's closet. When he finally escapes he makes for the thick Oregon forest where “he becomes the woods, which means he doesn't have to be anything else, invisible, gone” (Percy 248). For me, Percy's portrayal of the veteran is most noteworthy because my manuscript seeks to present an alternate idea of what a veteran might look like. As a critic I can dislike it or criticize it, but I'd rather write an opposing viewpoint.

Indeed, *West by Midwest* only hopes to present Sid as a real person with real moral and ethical problems that stem from his time in the service. He believes he has avoided any trauma, but his mentor, a chaplain who has gone AWOL, convinces him that every veteran must come to terms with what they participated in. Eden's young son is crucial in unlocking this idea for Sid, but it's important to note that he falls asleep as Sid talks about his military experience. This is both protective of his youth and, more importantly, indicative of the public; resources (counseling, therapy dogs, medication, etc.) are available, but given the rate of suicides for both combat and non-combat military members and vets, a lot of men and women are failed by the same government that sent them off to war in the first place.

West by Midwest is a movement toward an Edenic utopia. Once upon a time Americans raced for a better life Out West. I hope that this longing can be metaphorical

for Sid, and veterans, and humans in general: surely there is a better way than war. We should keep seeking. We can do better.

Sometimes we read things at precisely the right moments in our lives. Last week I stumbled across a passage in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus and his disciples traveled to Jerusalem. Along the way they stopped to rest in a village of Samaria, but the citizens refused to put them up. Two of the disciples asked if they should “command fire to come down from heaven” and smite the Samaritans for their inhospitable manner (Luke 9:51-56 KJV). Jesus promptly rebuked the disciples and said he didn’t “come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”

And they went to another village.

Conclusion

I’ve been writing stories for a quarter century. A lifetime of experiences have coalesced into this manuscript; religion and war, the great outdoors, rusty cars and small towns and gravel roads. I think you can grow up to the age of twenty-one, white and male, middle class, Middle America, comfortable, and off you go to basic training. There they have you squeeze off M-16 rounds at paper targets that resemble silhouettes of desk clocks. You imagine these targets are men in different uniforms, like those plastic army men you once played with as a child. Green versus tan. You keep firing. If you emerge from this experience as anywhere in the proximity of “hopeful,” you get the feeling you can accomplish a lot in this world. So you keep writing.

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CHAPTER 1

Across the track, backstopped by a cornfield, the county ambulance awaits. It's a small, rusted-out type III ambulance, white with red reflective lettering. Two EMTs sit on the hood, their heads bobbing along to music on the stereo. Directly in front of the ambulance, billboards tied to the fence line promote Casey's General Store, Hy-Vee, Midwest Bank & Trust, and the local U.S. Army Recruitment Office. In the exact middle an anti-drug sign reads DON'T METH UP YOUR LIFE, the slogan paired with a black-and-white image of an emaciated man curled up into himself. Opposite the signs are aluminum bleachers that ping whenever someone in the crowd takes a step. Chubby girls and boys play freeze tag. Their parents eat nachos, hot dogs, walking tacos, and popcorn from butter-stained paper bags. Silver flasks catch the stadium lights every so often. The people talk and tease and tap feet, waiting for the three drivers to finish putting their vehicles back together.

In the pit, Sid Rivers is hard at work. He patches both front tires and shoots them full of air with a 12-volt portable pump, unsticks gummy shoe adjusters, and with a rubber mallet whack-a-moles the Astro's hood so it'll latch. By the end of the fifteen-minute intermission Sid's camouflage jeans are spark-eaten from his welding torch, his white t-shirt dalmatianed with oil splotches.

"My ex-wifesh," says the driver beside Sid, indicating his Town & Country. Yellow lines zigzag the T&C's hood, cheap spray paint that drips and streaks. His mouth guard is also yellow, an unattached strap trailing down—a high school football keepsake, Sid figures. He's built like a bulldog, short and squat, and carries himself with a bravado

that resists the sunset of his glory days. Thirty years old, perhaps a hair under. Sid has seen a hundred derby drivers like him: men hoping to reclaim some fading masculinity out on the track.

“She got the kidsh, I got the minivan.” The mouth guard gives his speech a lisp.
“That a country shong or what?”

“It’s something,” agrees Sid, putting his jacket and helmet back on.

“Hey,” the T&C driver says, “I wash just fooling around.” He smiles a lemon wedge, takes his mouth guard out and spits. “Truth is, we got a new minivan. This one’s been recalled twice—ignition switch and now the airbags. Fool me once. Hey, that Astro’s holding up like a champ.”

“First time in a minivan.” Sid would rather derby in a land yacht—the metal Mercurys, rectangular Fords, anvil-headed Oldsmobiles—but over the years those vehicles have morphed into timid, plasticky creatures: hybrids and smart cars and who’s-gonna-drive-you-home convertibles. You have to evolve with the landscape.

“But you’ve derbied before.”

“Few times,” says Sid.

“Or more.”

“You from here?”

The man says yeah, he is. Born and raised.

Sid flips his visor. “Know anyone with a vintage Trans Am? 70s?”

“Huh uh. Didn’t peg you for a classics lover. What, you restore? Wouldn’t you rather tear them down out here?”

“Sure,” says Sid, and he forces a good-natured laugh. “Forget I even asked.” This is Friday night on the outskirts of Shell Rock; he spent the past three days canvassing houses, garages, an itty bitty body shop, a used car lot, and the local junkyard where he bought his Astro. When the season commenced he rolled through Grinnell, New Sharon, Pella, Oskaloosa, What Cheer, Mystic, Seymour, Promise City, Confidence, and Osceola. It’s his fourth full year on the circuit. He’s running out of towns.

A voice booms over the PA system. “Drivers, head back out.” The announcer surveys the track from a radio tower-like structure, a hut on four wooden legs. “This one’s for all the marbles.”

The oval-shaped track is a home run ball end to end, a gap single across the shorter side. Plenty of room to maneuver now that the eighteen minivan winner-take-all derby has been whittled down to Sid’s Chevy Astro, the Chrysler Town & Country, and a GMC Safari driven by some corn-fed six-foot-fiver who has yet to remove his helmet, even in the pit. They’re barricaded by half-buried tractor tires, concrete blocks the size of blue-ribbon hogs, and a ten-foot-high chain-link fence that, in theory, protects the crowd from each chunk of flying, fragmented metal.

The drivers face off in points of a triangle. Sid turns up Beethoven’s “Fidelio” overture on his radio as the crowd counts back from ten. Rapid-fire string allegro open, then deferment to soothing horn and clarinet adagio. Flute, oboe, piccolo. Woodwinds answered by cello. Music crescendos and diminuendos. Violins flutter. He smiles and closes his eyes.

The Safari broadsides him. It's like being frightened on a dark night: the way time stops, your heart leaps. Temporary disorientation. June rain pitchforked the ground yesterday and Sid spins fast, counterclockwise, midnight, nine, six o'clock. His seatbelt retractor mechanism first grinds then clenches, burrowing into his already tender shoulder. Sharp pain glides up his neck as his fingers vibrate atop the shaky wheel. When he comes to a stop there's no radio, no Beethoven: the impact jostled loose some important connections.

"T-bone steak!" shouts the announcer. "Another one like that and the newcomer's outta here. Here's a tip: it's a lot harder to hit a moving target."

Exhaust fumes cloud the track. The minivans hurl wet sod in their wake, some chunks flying as far as the grandstand, eliciting cheers from the rowdy crowd. The Safari lurches toward Sid, who guns the accelerator. Instead of making vehicular contact, the Safari bounces over a tractor tire and careens off a concrete block. Yellow sparks fly.

"A narrow escape for the newcomer!"

Sid exhales, fogging up his helmet's visor. The Astro handles like a horse in reverse but the concept's simple: drive and survive.

"Surfin' Safari's lagging out there," says the announcer.

Self-imposed damage from the concrete block. Sid's about to go in for the kill when the T&C beats him to it, backing into the Safari's rear passenger-side wheel base, crumpling its axle. A tried and true demo strategy is to use your rear end as a weapon and protect your dog house, your engine. The minivans' compact front ends make this an especially important tactic. Unfortunately, Sid's rear-wheel drive Astro leaves both ends

vulnerable. He cranks the transmission into reverse, backing out to build up some ramming speed, when his shifter rod pops off.

“Hell,” says Sid. Astro’s a real lemon. The useless, boomerang-shaped rod drops to his feet with a clatter. He hits the brakes just as his back end settles firmly against a concrete block. With the transmission stuck in reverse, he’s a sitting duck.

He prods his fingers inside the shifter hole, searching for the broken linkage. Feels like a stovetop range on his fingers but he locates the metal nub, manually working the tranny over N, down to D. He waves the heat out of his hand and grimaces, a cooked flesh smell filling the air. Not gonna do that twice.

Meanwhile the Safari circles around and faces off with the T&C, their hoods mirroring each other for a frozen moment. Sid stamps the pedal down to the corroded floorboard, RPMs surging, and makes good connection with the T&C’s rear end, launching it forward and into the Safari. The other two minivans meet head-on with a flat, packing thud. Smoke from their accordioned hoods mixes together and darkens as it plumes. Gears grind as the drivers alternately try reverse, drive. The T&C stalls out and the man inside removes his flag from the radio antenna. The Safari driver slams a big fist against his steering wheel.

“Newcomer wins in a thriller,” says the announcer. “Knocks both opponents out at once, ladies and gents. Don’t see that at every shindig. I always say, better lucky than good.”

Sid turns hard, ready for a victory lap with what’s left of his minivan, when someone in the crowd lets out a high-pitched shriek. Behind him, the Safari’s engine

catches fire. A handful of orange-petaled flames quickly spread and leap over to the T&C's hood, aided by propellant in the cheap spray paint, a fiery zigzag.

“That’s my son!” shouts the same woman.

The driver revs the minivan hard, rocking his body as though momentum will jar the front end loose. Flames pinwheel around the hood’s seam—revving speeds up the engine fan, feeding oxygen to the blaze. The T&C driver, his hood a bonfire, hops out the window and blitzes toward the bleachers. His yellow mouth guard falls down as he scales the fence.

“Get outta there!” yells someone else from the crowd.

But the panicked Safari driver—swinging his feet out, then his head—wedges his enormous upper body in the window frame. Goliath arms and legs dangle helplessly as the fire rages. Beneath his helmet, sweat is probably stinging his eyes, blinding him. In a more regulated event the driver would’ve rerouted the gas line to a smaller tank—like that of a motorcycle—in the far back seat of his minivan, but Sid’s thinking he didn’t modify the lines at all. No telling how much fuel is waiting in the tank like a time bomb.

Sid kills the Astro and pulls off his helmet, looking around for the EMTs. They’re still near the cornfield, swearing at and kicking their ambulance, the battery of which is dead from leaving the stereo on too long. Sid dives out and stumbles toward the wreck, lifting up his white t-shirt from under his jacket and breathing into the sweaty cotton, a makeshift air filter. He waves away the heat and slips in close. The driver, wearing brand new coveralls and a helmet with a tinted face shield, struggles as Sid tries pulling him free.

“Settle down!”

But even when the driver stops flailing, Sid can't tug-o-war him out. It's like shoving a cork *into* a wine bottle.

“Sorry, big guy. Plan B.” For a second the screaming woman, the mother in the crowd, must surely think Sid is trying to murder her son as he pushes the driver's helmeted head down, shoving him back into the flaming minivan. From there all it takes is a heave and he's out, free and clear, falling hard on his butt. Standing up, he towers head and shoulders above Sid.

They dive behind the Astro just as a fiery spiral erupts and curls into the dark night, scorching the conjoined Town & Country and brightening the grandstand where the crowd looks on, horrified and titillated. The driver removes his helmet.

“You saved me...” Peach fuzz on his upper lip, breath hot with whiskey. Beak nose and close-set eyes. Big hayseed high-schooler looking to impress his classmates or girlfriend.

“How old are you,” says Sid, breathing heavily, “seventeen?”

The dazed farm kid nods. “My birthday's a week out. Couldn't wait.”

The EMTs finally arrive on foot, huffing and puffing. One throws a shock blanket over the kid's knobby shoulders while the other tackles the blaze, sweeping a fire extinguisher left and right. Sparks die as the canister's nozzle puffs a final carbon dioxide smoke ring.

Snowbladed four-wheelers whisk away the Safari, its charred skeleton ready to crumble and ash away into nothing. As things calm down, the announcer calls Sid up to a

platform near the booth. He's an older guy, mostly bald but with white hair sprouting from his t-shirt's neck. Hairy arms too. Stub of a half-smoked cigar tucked behind his ear. The monochromatic yellow of the sodium lights above gives his skin a pallid glow.

"Nice driving out there, chief." While he shakes Sid's hand, applause sprinkles from the grandstand. Spilled popcorn snowflakes off the bleachers. Shuffling feet, joints popping, phlegm-filled coughs.

"You know," the announcer says, "most guys run from a fire." Feedback from the PA system squeals as he shoves his microphone, the foam cover of which smells like cigar smoke, into Sid's face. "What made you go back?"

Sid shrugs and looks away. Under the bleachers, teenagers make out. The big farm kid is hearing it from his mom, who's got him backed up against the concession stand, pointer finger jabbing his wheelbarrow chest. A few dozen children congregate in the space between front-row bleacher and award platform. They drink grape pop and lick their sticky fingers.

"Your winnings, chief," says the announcer, waving a standard #10 envelope. He chews on his cigar stub. "Whatchu plan on doing with the check? Fix up that Astro?"

"Think I'm done with minivans for a while."

"Yeah?"

"Trying to find an old school Trans Am, black with the gold firebird hood."

"Oh—a muscle car man. That your dream ride?"

Sid pockets the envelope. "Let's just say I'm looking to reconnect."

CHAPTER 2

Eden Hartz is ready to crash. It's been a long week at Goldschmidt's Café, where she works the breakfast/lunch shift for \$4.35 an hour plus regular tips, flirt tips, and worst of all, pity tips. She asked for weekends off, but Goldie put her on the schedule for tomorrow—five a.m. wakeup. Meanwhile her friends, at least those who are still childless, are hitting the bars. Friday night is ladies night at the Wagon Wheel Tavern. But even if she *could* afford a babysitter, what's the point? The men around here are dogs. A single mom who lives on the tiptoe edge of Heritage, the same small town she grew up in, Eden is north of thirty and remembers how old that used to seem.

She sighs and empties her pockets. She hates the weight of gaudy keychains, so she keeps only two silver rings with four keys attached: house (front door and back), Tercel, and one for the café. She does, however, allow herself a single keychain, purchased at Wal-Mart: a foldable corkscrew the size of fingernail clippers. Comes in handy on nights like this, when she's rummaged through the silverware drawer, both utensil drawers, and the wine glass cabinet but still can't find her good corkscrew, the one that doesn't bracelet her wrists with pain when she muscles out the cork to a bottle of bottom-shelf merlot.

Bobby, her five-year-old son, may have swiped the good corkscrew along with her potato masher and egg beater for battle with his toys. Knives, he understands, are strictly off-limits, but lately he's been testing boundaries such as "don't wander off in the store," "play nice with others," and "leave mom's knife set alone." YMCA Summer Camp is too expensive. T-ball, a cheaper option, doesn't interest him. (All those rules...)

Only a Super Nintendo console they bought for three bucks at a garage sale last week keeps him out of trouble anymore. He became obsessed with it, as five-year-olds do with something new and flashy and loud. Ten games, controllers included—a great deal, even for an old relic that Eden, despite the sticker’s assurance, couldn’t believe still worked.

But she can’t ask Bobby because he’s asleep upstairs. Last time she used the keychain corkscrew to unplug a bottle of this cheap merlot it wobbled over, splashing and staining her broadcloth dress shirt, one of three she owned, and multiple trips to the Heritage laundromat (her washer broke down in March) only produced pink polka dots. She unbuttons her waitressing shirt and flaps it over the back of a kitchen chair. Starts unhooking her bra but then notices all the curtains are open, thinks about the bevy of farm boys up the road, how they’re all on the wrong side of puberty, more or less, and she sighs, inconvenienced by men yet again.

Eden’s house is bigger than she and Bobby need; four bed, two-and-a-quarter bath Victorian; upstairs, downstairs, and a full basement in constant state of disrepair. Her parents died suddenly, within days of each other. Those comforting her and her older sister deemed the timeline romantic. “She died of a broken heart,” claimed one distant relative. Eden scoffed. She never saw them hold hands, not even once. The heart attack may have been an act of solidarity, but it wasn’t catalyzed by romance. Only that their worlds were defined by each other. And Eden—what is she left with? This too-big house, a handful of bills, and childhood memories as fond and terrible as the next grown-up’s.

A window fan pours semi-cool air, a potpourri of pine, wet earth, and that licorice tang of sweetroot, into her upstairs bedroom. She hangs her bra on a dresser knob and

rustles a pocket t-shirt, dark blue, out of the hamper. Fits like a handshake. Old clothes weirdly become a part of you. Anything you don't toss aside does. She walks through a pair of mesh shorts, a keepsake from tenth-grade basketball—half a lifetime ago—and voila, ready to get her buzz on.

Outside, their beagle growls. Beans. Got his name from the tiny white patches on his back. She hears his chain uncoil and tighten as he lets loose a few get-outta-here barks.

“Eden!”

The window fan's chop distorts the shout, which comes from the front yard. But the voice is as familiar as her well-worn shirt, if not as welcome. She goes to the window, slides it up. Turns off the fan and sets it on the carpet.

“It's almost midnight. What do you want, Zeke?”

Zeke Hartz wavers. His head is slumped over on his left shoulder, a zombie pose. The yard light fails to flatter his disheveled looks, illuminating his patchy beard and sweaty face. Cowlicks sprouted on the crown of his head. Bad posture is worsened by his condition: he's drunk or tweaking or some hazardous combination of both. Even his baby blues lose their luster, eyes sunken back, hiding under bushy brow ridges. She and Zeke grew up together. Got crazy. Got married. Now all they share is a last name. Divorce cost more than Eden cared to pay for, and Zeke wasn't chipping in.

“Did you walk here?”

“No,” he calls up at her. He's about fifty feet away, standing near the stump of a troublesome oak, but his voice projects. “I ran.”

“So run back to your apartment.”

Beans barks again, but Eden can't see him from the window. Poor thing's a senior citizen in dog years; she constantly worries Bobby will head outside one morning and find him dead.

“Don't you recognize me, Beans?” asks Zeke.

Zeke left Beans behind when he moved out. He never was any good at taking care of things. Eden starts to close the window.

“Hey!”

“Bobby's sleeping,” she hisses down, a whisper/shout. “What do you want?”

“You—I wanna talk to you.” He shifts his weight, all hundred and forty pounds of his meth-riddled frame, from side to side. Looks to consider plopping down on the stump, but doesn't. “Talk to me, Eden.”

Zeke rarely contacts Eden except for afterhours hook-up calls, voicemails ranging from lonely to threatening, and text messages that promise sobriety, fidelity, and everything else he never delivered when they lived together. When they first split up he came into Goldschmidt's Café and demanded he serve her, but Goldie and the two line cooks chased him off. Even so, she isn't *that* surprised he's here tonight—the drunken display is just something men do.

“We don't have anything to talk about,” says Eden. “Next time call first.”

“You changed your number. But I'm sure I'll find it scrawled in some toilet stall.”

“Zeke...”

“Bobby,” he says. “Bobby.”

“You can see him when I start getting your child support checks. What, did they get lost in the mail?”

Dull metal appears in Zeke’s right hand. A gun. Pistol. She’s never seen him packing one before—the sudden escalation, from custodial bickering to firearms, cements her in place. He smiles so big she can see his janky teeth even from so far away. He feeds off her fear. It emboldens him.

A car screams down the gravel road. Coming from town. Eden wriggles her fingers and exhales. Probably the cops—Zeke tends to leave a destructive wake. A dusty cloud billows behind the car as it veers off the gravel road and aims for her driveway. Headlights fall over Zeke, casting a long, pointy shadow that reaches the front porch.

“If you scam,” she calls out, “I won’t press charges.”

Instead of fleeing, Zeke levels his gun at the approaching car. He fires, a hesitant shot at first, then unloads a barrage that blinds the car. Headlight glass crunches under the front tires, which sag, also hit. The car, an ugly orange coupe, thumps up and down and grinds to a halt fifteen feet from Zeke. A wiper blade rolls off the hood and clatters on the gravel driveway. Something inside the engine hisses.

Eden’s lungs feel like popped balloons. Throat lodged with fear. She struggles for breath. Now he’s done it. Crazy Zeke’s killed someone.

But to her surprise a man hops out of the bullet-riddled coupe. Rooster. Unscathed and calmer than Eden can believe. He’s tall and looks a lot more aged than twenty-nine. Wearing a wife-beater and boxer shorts. In his hand, a silvery revolver.

“Stay away!” yells Zeke.

“No one threatens me,” says Rooster, reaching back inside the car and flipping on the still-operable brights.

“Argh!” Zeke covers his eyes.

The lights unnerve Beans, who starts braying like he’s caught the scent of a rabbit. Eden ducks but keeps an eye on the scene playing out in her front yard, thinking she has a pretty good idea what the two men are arguing about.

“I’ve been doing your work for years,” says Zeke, waving his pistol around. “It ends tonight.”

Without warning, Rooster pops off a shot that sends Zeke to his knees, howling in pain as he holds his thigh with both hands.

Eden’s guts twist. She’s witnessed bar fights, punches delivered and received, detached retinas, boots to faces, teeth rattling around the beer- and blood-stained floor, but nothing like this. It’s possible her neighbors heard the shots, but out here on the edge of town gunfire’s attributed to target shooting or, this late at night, coyote hunting.

Zeke army-crawls for the front porch, his face writhing in pain. Rooster calmly shuts his coupe off, walks over behind Zeke, and empties his revolver into the fallen man’s back. Zeke flops like a largemouth bass with each shot.

Stop, Eden tries to say, but no words come out. When she backs up she stumbles over the fan. Rooster’s head snaps up and he aims the gun at her bedroom window, but stops short of pulling the trigger. Instead, he heads for the front door.

Eden’s flight instinct kicks in. She runs down the hall to Bobby’s room and whisks off his *Toy Story* comforter. The boy, curled up like an inchworm, squints and

protests. He's groggy. Cymbals clang in Eden's ears and she can't breathe again but she picks him up anyway, all thirty-eight pounds, clutching him close. The front door handle rattles as she carries her son downstairs.

They duck out back, closing the door behind them. She huffs and puffs across the field, thick switchgrass tugging at her bare feet. Finally they reach the creek bed, where they lie and wait. No backyard light. The house is a mere silhouette.

"Why are we...?" Bobby doesn't even know which questions to ask.

"Quiet. It's a camping trip."

"Camping?"

"Yeah, you know." She speaks slowly, trying to catch her breath. "Like with a tent."

"We don't have a tent."

"Well, use your imagination. Shh."

He senses something wrong. "If I'm quiet, I get to play Nintendo for...five hours."

"Five hours," says Eden. "Sure, why not?"

Back at the house, Rooster shouts obscenities. Eden covers Bobby's ears, and the look he gives her...how do kids know so little and so much at the same time? Beans, his old voice growing hoarse, barks and barks. The chain jangles. Finally he stops, and the sounds of country nightlife take over. Crickets trill. Looper moths snap their wings, probing the front yard light. A great horned owl murmurs. Nature's symphony. Peaceful.

*

She successfully fooled both men for over half a decade. After her discovery, waving the pee stick like a wand, like she could abracadabra the solid pink lines away, she made her decision. Zeke Hartz, the lesser of two evils. And anyway, they were already married. Zeke, to his credit, tried to be a dad at first, but besides the loser role models in his own life, he never could kick his drug habit. They split. Eden didn't blame Zeke, since Bobby was never his to begin with. Zeke got an apartment in Heritage and, other than that time in Goldschmidt's or a glimpse down the grocery aisle at Fareway, they didn't see much of each other and were okay with the arrangement.

Now she'll never see him again.

They're still in the creek bed, her and Bobby, a half-court shot from the silent house. Daylight smudges the eastern horizon. An impartial observer might mistake the scene for a Grant Wood painting, something quaint and charming, anything but a murder scene. Rooster, chased away by the light, finally drives off in his bullet-ridden orange coupe. The damaged car thumps and shudders down her driveway. Gravel dust billows, settles. She waits for him to double back, but he doesn't.

"Stay here, Bobby."

But Bobby wants to go back inside and play *Mario Kart*. "I just made it to Ghost Valley," he whines.

Eden cups his dirty chin in her palm. Physically, mentally, she's exhausted. Her mind drifts back to those early days of motherhood, when she would stretch across the bed and drape a hand into Bobby's bassinet so he could gum her pinkie finger and soothe

himself back to sleep. Sometimes he gnawed so aggressively it felt like he'd work her pinkie off by morning.

"Ghost Valley is a hard level," he assures her.

"It's not safe inside, Bobby. Some men were here. They were fighting. They were trying to hurt each other."

"Was one of them Dad?"

She click-clacks her molars. What a hell of a question. "Yes."

Mud's smeared across his face like war paint. His bony shoulders sag. He slept a few restless hours, wedged between her and a shaggy arrow wood bush that concealed them from view. Every time Eden shifted her weight, Bobby said he was hungry, thirsty, or asked about his game.

"Listen," she says, trying to keep her voice even. "I'm going to come back for you. We'll take the car and visit Aunt Sarah in Utah."

"Is that far?"

"Pretty far."

"What about my Nintendo?"

"We'll take it with us."

Bobby nods slowly. "And Beans?"

"Sure," says Eden. "We'll put him in the back seat with you. Mom'll be right back, okay?"

Bobby hugs the base of the arrow wood bush. Above his head popcorn-like buds tremble. Eden twists the stalk, ripping off a flowery bunch.

“Save this for me, will you? This bouquet?”

Bobby surrenders the tiniest smile. Men want to feel needed—Bobby’s five and Eden can already see the desire forming. He clutches the arrow wood blossom close to his chest, honored by the task. Eden kisses his hair, which still smells of his watermelon shampoo, and leaves him there. Feels wrong, but she must. She emerges slowly from the patch of woods that lines the creek. Crouching down in the switchgrass that never gets mowed, she wedges the keys and unfolded corkscrew between her knuckles—jagged claws when she forms a fist.

The house is fifty feet away through a minefield of toy dump trucks and Nerf guns and RC cars with long-dead batteries. Her mesh shorts feel clammy on her legs. Her heart thuds. A cool morning breeze makes her shiver. If her cell phone’s inside, does she even bother sticking around to call the cops? A handful are extra chummy with Rooster. Better off on the run, except she has no wallet, no cards, no checkbook. She could go to the bank and withdraw money—in Heritage, facial recognition is sufficient—but what if Rooster’s waiting for her? Anyway, she has a lot more cash stashed away inside the house, an envelope full of undeclared tips from waiting tables at Goldschmidt’s.

Perched on top of an upside-down bucket is her good corkscrew. So Bobby did take it. Hard to get on his case about it now. Feels more like a weapon than her keys, so she picks it up and darts behind the house, in between the back porch and corner nearest the driveway, where the particleboard siding is discolored due to rain. Outside, no activity. No movement. Eden peers inside the house through the back window. Everything’s more alive than it should be. The living room lights are still on. Couch

cushions are overturned and books like fallen dominoes trail down the hall that leads into the kitchen. Their radio, a unit with two cassette decks and an analog AM/FM dial, broadcasts the local radio station, KFUN, “The One for Fun.” Blondie sings about pineapple skies and Hawaiian love.

Out front the dog chain comes up empty—no Beans. Must’ve wriggled free somehow. He’s probably chasing bunnies in the bean field or down the road sleuthing around turkey confinement buildings.

Zeke’s body is gone. A garden hose snakes from the side of the house to the front yard, which is soggy. Rooster washed away Zeke’s blood, she realizes. Covering up the murder. Like it never happened. She needs to leave *now*.

But the Tercel is dead, ignition doesn’t even rattle. She pounds the horn, the battery reserving enough juice for an unpleasant sigh. Under the hood, spark plug wires are tousled and frayed like unkempt hair.

“Great,” she says. Where can she find another car?

The front door, ajar, creaks as she enters. It wasn’t deadbolted, just latched. A simple credit card trick—insert, angle, jam—and Rooster was inside. Eden used the same technique back in the day, breaking into unoccupied houses to support her addiction.

Shoes are pyramid-piled in the entryway. Weird. She follows the trail of books, most with cracked spines and torn pages, to the kitchen. Rounding the corner, she screams.

“Just wine,” she says, taking deep breaths. “It’s just wine...”

The bottle of merlot has been decapitated, contents glug-glugged in a red puddle on the sheet vinyl flooring. Glass shards sprinkle the counter. Her hands shake as she steps over the mess and unplugs the radio. Pop music fades, after which an echo persists.

Most noticeably absent is her purse, which she left on the kitchen counter. Just as she suspected, only its unimportant contents remain: a tidewrack of lip balm, gum wrappers, barrettes. And something she thought she'd thrown out long ago: an old photograph creased down the middle and faded to near sepia, with lens flare like a sun dog. Her and Zeke in the good old days. Maybe it's sentimentality, but she slips the photo in her shorts pocket.

Her phone's soaking in the toilet. Waterlogged. She doesn't even bother fishing it out. In the den, near the sagging entertainment center, Bobby's Super NES has been stepped on—plastic fragments litter the carpet. His controllers are missing. No matter. She'll find him a different game system when they get wherever they're going.

Dresser drawers are scattered around her bedroom. Rooster rifled through her intimates, a thought that peppers her arms and legs with goosebumps. She parts the remaining thongs and hipsters and Fruit of the Loom value pack briefs, locating an unopened pack of Marlboro Menthols and a disposable lighter. Bobby thinks she quit smoking a long time ago. Truth be told, she doesn't smoke all that much. The pack's been in the drawer since before her money stash hit four figures. Her fingernails scrape the bottom of the drawer. No envelope. She reckons there was three grand, give or take, inside. Security blanket money. Getting-the hell-out-of-Heritage money. She curses, slamming her fists against the dresser.

As she walks past Bobby's room, a tricolored shape catches her eye. Beans. The beagle's furry body, strung up by the neck with videogame controller cords, dips the ceiling fan blade. His legs are slack, pink tongue hard and dry. Lower canines yellowed with plaque. Bulbous eyes. His bowels, emptied out, amass in a brownish-black heap on Bobby's *Toy Story* comforter. Eden turns away as the smell overpowers her gag reflex. Even dog shit can't mask the scent of death.

CHAPTER 3

Heritage seems like a pretty nice town. A welcome sign planted where Highway 34 rolls into city limits shows the population as “Ten thousand Iowans, give or take.” After several columns of dilapidated colonials and roughshod trailers and brick cottages, the town opens up to a YMCA, community college, sheet metal factory, truss plant, and a thrift shop called Wore and Piece. Heritage Community Bank’s digital sign cycles between the time and temperature, but some of the sign’s bulbs are burnt out: 85 degrees looks like 35 and feels like 100, Midwestern humidity in full force. Scattered beyond the town square are other small town staples: various bars, Dollar Saver, Wal-Mart, one-screen movie theater, pharmacy, five churches of various denominations, and a diner, Goldschmidt’s Café, where a red-aproned waitress asks Sid what’ll it be.

“I’d murder a pig for your tenderloin special.”

“You don’t have to,” she says. “They slaughtered Wilbur after the 4-H show last night.”

Sid’s stomach turns. Maybe there’s such a thing as too fresh.

“Pig did pretty good,” says the waitress, noting his hesitation. “Third place.”

He orders egg salad on wheat. The bread’s as dry as a sunbaked t-shirt on a clothesline but he gobbles it down. Free refills on lukewarm, watered down coffee. It’s the dead hour between lunch and supper, the café sparsely populated. When the waitress brings his check, Sid asks if anyone around town drives a classic Trans Am.

“You know, one of those old Smokey and the Bandit cars,” he explains.

“Oh, I love that show,” says the waitress. “Tom Selleck.”

“Burt Reynolds. Black car, T-top, gold firebird decal on the hood.”

The woman’s new to town, she explains. Just arrived last month, Memorial Day weekend. Knows less about who drives what than movie trivia.

“Sorry, mister.”

Sid waves off her apology. It was a long shot, anyway. Keeps getting longer.

His rig is quadruple-parked outside, an F-150 truck pulling a flatbed trailer with a 1987 Buick LeSabre on top—his go-to land yacht car. The three cups of coffee are just kicking in and he rubs sleepy dirt from his eyes. He drove to Heritage after last night’s derby, pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot, slept in the truck, and when morning light cut across the dash he was back at it. Poked around used car lots until his stomach growled like a mountain lion, then hit the café.

He can’t remember if he’s been to Heritage before. He could keep a list, and probably should, but sometimes he thinks X-ing off possibilities would be more depressing than it’s worth.

After a few more hours of looking around town, he follows handmade signs sporting helium balloons to the fairgrounds. Ruts carve up pit road. As other derby cars arrive, trailers bouncing on the pockmarked gravel, drivers in each truck rubberneck, sizing him up. Tonight’s a standard land yacht derby, single heat square-off. Sid prefers multiple heats. He likes fixing things, or at least the opportunity to try. There’s \$750 in prize money, fifty bucks for mad dog driver. The drivers U around a man in a sweat-stained cowboy hat as he notes a last-minute rule modification: nylon mesh screens are

required on the driver's side window, so Sid digs some webbing out of his trunk and secures it with zip ties.

“Probably goes without saying,” the cowboy-hatted man drones, “but no Imperials, no Suicide Lincolns, no Y-framers. You'll be inspected 'fore we start.”

Though the rules of demolition derby vary from town to town, a few core guidelines remain consistent. Helmets required. No teaming up. No smacking into disqualified cars. All doors welded shut. Drivers' doors painted a contrasting color because purposely striking them is illegal. No glass allowed, to include windows, mirrors, headlights, taillights. But Sid's favorite rule of all: you must strike another operable car, at minimum, once per minute. Otherwise you're DQ'd for sandbagging. Derby isn't about avoiding the crash, it's about surviving it.

The inspection isn't much more than a glance under the hood, kick of each tire, and knuckle-knocks along each car's body. The man in the cowboy hat argues briefly with one driver, then waves an acquiescent hand. Eleven other cars, primer-gray with numbers and nicknames painted on their bodies, line up two by two and wait to enter the track. Sid cranes his neck to see what's left of the county fair. Neon lights dazzle across the midway, but the Ferris wheel climbs with empty carts rocking; the derby is the fair's capstone event. Free admission with an all-day pass. After the bleachers fill, people waterfall onto the grassy embankment and pop open lawn chairs and coolers.

The guy beside Sid drives a Mercury Cougar with a cannibalized hood and doors—nothing quite aligns. COUGAR KID painted on the hood. He leers at Sid. Maybe they derbied against each other somewhere, sometime. Hard to say.

Sid loaded the Buick with a cassette deck, a low-end Pioneer model that he pulled from a salvage yard. He feeds it a tape and Mozart's "Ave verum corpus" crackles over the speakers, a live recording complete with an audible sotto voce at the beginning, and even over the engine idles and crowd yammers and Kenny Chesney's Dixie-drawled baritone on the PA system, the choral hymn finds its way into the Mercury parallel to Sid. Mozart's motet in D major unnerves the other driver.

"Up yours," shouts the driver, offering the middle finger of his gloved hand.

Soon the cowboy-hatted man opens a gate and motions them forward. Drivers cavalcade onto and then around the course, their derby cars distributed as evenly as numbers on a clock. Someone fires a starting pistol.

Most of the other drivers plow into each other with little regard for geometry or vehicular mechanics, weaponizing any and all parts of their sedans. One guy, stuck behind a Crown Vic, jams his foot to the floorboard and redlines his engine, the flywheel nearly separating. Smoke pours from his grill.

After a few minutes most cars have rear ends that resemble chewed bubblegum. The decommissioned drivers don't seem too upset; they had their fun. Plus they put on a good show, and the crowd loves them for it. One after another they retrieve flags from their antennas, conceding defeat, hoping they drove furious enough to win the mad dog prize.

Only one other driver, in a shiny Caprice Classic that looks like a demolition virgin, has some skills behind the wheel. But he's trying to keep his car too clean, driving around the edge, giving a few love taps so as not to sandbag, waiting for the rookies to

have their fun before moving in. Bad strategy. No points awarded at the end for prettiest ride. Sid gets into the thick of it but has enough car left to put the Caprice Classic out at the end. It runs afoul of a concrete barrier block just as Sid's temp gauge strikes capital H. His radiator hisses like a cornered cat. As the crowd awards perfunctory applause, Sid wonders if the Caprice was the hometown favorite.

Well. Better luck next year.

A tow truck brandishing a HERITAGE HAULERS decal drops Sid's Buick off near his trailer. The guy even hops out and helps Sid shove the car onboard.

"Less cars in the demo this year," says the operator, patting the Buick's trunk. "Was a time they had to cap it at fifty, no lie. Sure do miss these square-assed sedans. Built like a house of bricks."

"Preaching to the choir," says Sid, tipping the guy ten bucks. He folds the rest of the winnings into his front pocket. Cash always feels better than a check. Cut out the middleman. "Where do I get a drink around here?"

"Wagon Wheel. McCrae's lost their liquor license back in April, and no one goes to the Trapdoor unless they want burgers. Of course, someone gets arrested, nine times out of ten it's at the Wheel."

"I'll take my chances. Hey, anyone you know drive a vintage Trans Am?"

"Like *Knight Rider*?"

"Sure," says Sid. Close enough.

"No one I've hauled. I'd say try the junkyard, but it ain't open to the public."

"That's a real crackerjack business model."

“Right? Some people just want to be left alone, I guess.”

As the tow truck putters off, Sid straps his Buick to the trailer. Tie down chains and ratchet load binders on all four corners. Hands slick with sweat, he grunts and pulls the links taut. Inside the truck’s cab, the only water bottle he finds offers no more than a few tantalizing drops. His tongue practically sticks to the roof of his mouth.

Online searches for old Pontiac Trans Ams proved bountiful but ultimately fruitless—only a dummy would put their hit-and-run car on the Internet—so over the last few years he’s searched every junkyard, landfill, salvage auction, impound auction, and used car lot in Iowa. Well, most of them, anyway. A few leads here and there keep Sid going, but nothing ever pans out. Sneaking around a junkyard in the middle of the night? No thanks. Cold beer, on the other hand, sounds good enough to die for.

CHAPTER 4

Of the few people in Heritage who will miss Zeke Hartz, none will miss him more than the man who killed him. Zeke was Rooster's best distributor. Even after he skimmed off the top, Zeke brought in close to a thousand dollars a week. He took all the risks and Rooster made a nice profit. But now Zeke is gone, and even if Rooster can deal with the other two Hartzes—shut them up for good—he worries about his main source of revenue, which is not the junkyard he owns and operates, but peddling methamphetamine in the southwest quadrant of Iowa.

Rooster sits in the Hawkeye Inn parking lot and wonders how everything changed so suddenly. Yesterday was business as usual. Today he's a killer. The first shot, the one that bit him in the leg, could be construed as self-defense, but multiple bullets in a man's back is pretty damning evidence. Murder—one of the seven deadlies, he muses.

Hawkeye Inn, a two-story eyesore with faded yellow siding and thirty-some-odd rooms, family-owned yet, oddly enough, not family-friendly, is the last place on Rooster's list. He already hit up the Super 8. Before that he drove by the houses of Shelby Tate, who's spurned Rooster's advances multiple times, and Caroline Thiesen, the mayor's second cousin. Close friends of Eden. At both houses, the men were outside. One seeding bald patches in the yard, the other working on his Camry, car's hind leg lifted up like a dog ready to piss. Big men, factory workers, hands as calloused as tree bark. No thanks.

Rooster exits his Lincoln—the orange Plymouth is locked up and tucked away back in his junkyard—and makes for the motel. AMERICAN OWNED runs across the

marquee. The sun sets on his back and feels like fire, mid-June heatwave. Air so muggy you could breaststroke through it. If Amos was helping out instead of spending all day prepping for the derby, this search would be going a lot better.

A bell chimes above Rooster's head, faux charm. Green lampshades give the lobby a sinful feeling. Got the A/C unit blasting, abrupt change in temperature making Rooster sick to his stomach, full body shiver, and he wonders how it stays hot so long into the evening. A circular wall clock, angled like it wants to roll away, shows eight-fifteen. Derby should be over about now. The pimple-faced desk clerk says he just started night audit but the computer's down. He shows Rooster a giant rolodex.

"My dad says this way's better anyhow," he says in a squeaky tenor. "More of a personal touch."

"Great story," says Rooster, grabbing the rolodex and flipping through the cards. Only one H, Hooker. Very funny. "You make people show IDs here?"

The kid gulps. "Yessir. Hawkeye Inn policy."

"Then what the hell is this?"

"That, uh...that was the woman's name. Janice Hooker. Came in last night and I copied her license letter for letter, always do."

"Come here by herself?"

"Yessir."

"Oh. In that case, my apologies."

Rooster leaves skid marks in the parking lot. Cranks the AC. He cruises the strip, not really sure what he's looking for. Anything out of the ordinary. Most everything's closed this time of day. Then he spots the stadium lights at the track.

Cars funnel out both lanes of the driveway and onto Old Highway 6. Rooster barges in, receiving a few honks and middle fingers. He curves around the 4-H buildings and pulls into the pit. Just one derby car remains.

Amos Attridge leans against his battered Caprice with a dejected look on his face, lighting the next cigarette with his previous one. Smoke seethes from his nostrils, butts crumpled near his six-inch work boots like spent shells. Rooster pulls alongside and zaps down his windows, a smell of scorched tires and leaked car liquids filling the air.

“Take it you lost.”

Amos hunches down and scowls. The Caprice that he borrowed probably won't run again; its front end is sardine canned, metal peeled back all the way to the wheel wells. Pissing oil pretty bad if that black puddle underneath is any indication. Rooster tells him hurry up, they'll swing by for the derby car later.

“Guy that won?” says Amos. “New guy. Drifter. Betcha he cemented his frame.”

“How can you tell?”

Amos stomps out his cigarette and plops down beside Rooster. The Lincoln slumps a shoulder under his considerable weight. “I've done this before, you know.”

“If anyone asks,” Rooster says, uninterested in Amos's sour grapes, “I was with you last night, working on the Caprice, getting it ready for the derby.”

“Could be he foamed it—bet he paid off the inspector. Foam’s a fire hazard. He took off before I could take a look at his ride, see for myself.”

Rooster shakes his head and speeds off. As they dip under the 2nd Avenue tunnel, a departing train whistles. Rooster wonders if maybe Eden and her boy hopped onboard. Should’ve checked the station. But then he remembers there’s only one passenger train per day, and that leaves at high noon—all other trains are devoted to coal, timber, and similar commerce. Unless they’re freight-hopping, and that seems unlikely since the boy’s young and puny, the tracks aren’t a realistic option. He shuts off his Lincoln in front of the Chinese buffet.

The town square park takes up a half acre, automated sprinklers keeping grass green and trees happy. Sidewalks cut a perfect X through the park, at the center of which is a limestone fountain. Water laps down the fountain’s wedding-cake-style layers: smallest at the top, expanding down to a ringed moat. June bugs freckle the top layer, attracted to the spotlights. After Rooster and Amos search the performance stage and both restrooms, they pause briefly at the fountain, where a sweet mist trails off its bubbling peak.

Amos leans on the fountain’s safety railing, which groans against his weight. He’s wearing cargo shorts and a black Ford t-shirt, the glossy red lettering of which catches every trace of light—might as well be a bull’s-eye on his chest. He hasn’t even asked what they’re doing. He unpeels his t-shirt from his sweaty chest, flapping and stretching the fabric, panting like a dog.

Oak trees loom in playing-card shapes, massive clubs and spades, comforting silhouettes. Beyond the trees, Rooster and Amos are walled in by shops, mostly eateries: the smell of Mexican food lingers even though Mi Hermano closed at nine. Goldschmidt's Café, where Eden works, closed an hour before that. Would she be dumb enough to go back to work tomorrow morning?

Amos says, "I'll take another car to Dogwood next week. A better car. He'll be there, that guy, the one in the Buick."

"You think I have cars lying around," says Rooster, "just waiting for you to crash?"

Although they've known each other since high school, where Rooster was three years younger than but only one grade below Amos, they only became friends, or at least criminal associates, a few years ago. A no-necker with a whiskey-barrel chest, hands the size of twenty-dollar steaks, and a nose like a morel mushroom, Amos once played football for the Heritage Demons, going both ways: offensive guard, defensive tackle. During a game against their fiercest rival, he busted up a running back's knee, hospitalizing the kid. Although the Demons' coaching staff protested that the low strike had been incidental, Amos was ejected. Sometime later Rooster learned the head coach had ordered the dirty play—it wasn't yet halftime and the other team's running back had already gone for a hundred yards. Demons won in overtime.

Lately, Amos has been spending hours upon hours in Rooster's junkyard, tinkering with the many forgotten and much abused cars lying around, which is probably why he counters with the fact that Rooster has no shortage of vehicles.

“I need those for the trunk space, Amos. You know that. Plus they’re laundering items.”

“Laundry...?”

“Forget it.”

Sherbet lights melt across the fountain as its geyser rises. Every few minutes the clicking of an automatic timer gets louder, rotating the colored lights and raising or lowering the geyser. Amos dips his massive hand into the moat section and scoops up a handful of change.

“Wheat penny,” he says, grinning and showing Rooster the tequila-colored coin.

“You’re a rich man,” says Rooster. He slaps Amos’s wet hand, sprinkling the change back into the moat. The big man frowns but does nothing. If Amos were ever so inclined he could kill Rooster easily, outweighing him by a hundred pounds. Rooster knows this and it frightens him. But it also intrigues him—fear and attraction, he realizes, run a parallel course.

Amos pouts briefly, then holds up a crooked finger. They find Paul Hoffman, town drunk, sprawled out on a park bench. A piss stain the shape of Florida trails down his frazzled Wrangler jeans. His face glows redder than usual, the work of the fountain lights. Half passed out, he mumbles incoherently, something about mistreatment at the Wagon Wheel Tavern, from which Rooster thought he’d been banned. Hoffman stretches his legs, filling up the length of the park bench. Untied shoelaces hang like marionette strings between the bench’s slats.

“Seen anyone in the park?” asks Rooster.

Hoffman lifts a single sleepy eyelid. “Hmm? Like who?”

But Rooster doesn't offer any descriptors—if he starts asking about Eden and Bobby, people will connect him to Zeke's sudden disappearance. Not that they'd take Hoffman's word for it, but in a small town hearsay is as damning as video evidence. Civic justice meted out by hard stares and refusal of service. Rooster couldn't handle that kind of reproach—someday, he'd like to be mayor. The youngest mayor in Heritage history, barely thirty.

Amos takes Rooster's silence for displeasure. He reaches out and grabs Hoffman's neck and one-handed lifts the man into the air, raising him until his untied shoes dangle a foot off the ground. When Hoffman's larynx makes a sound like a spring uncoiling, Rooster cringes and steps back.

“Just don't kill him,” he tells Amos.

Eyes bulged, slobber on his lips, Hoffman utters, as best he can, that no, he hasn't seen anyone, not even cops. The stain on his pants stars out, Texas-shaped.

“Where's your car?” asks Rooster.

Hoffman moans and points toward Wore and Piece, the secondhand store.

“That's more like it,” says Amos, shoving Hoffman back.

Hoffman gasps, choking on the sudden presence of oxygen, unable to speak. For a second Rooster thinks he's about to form a dirty hand gesture, an up yours or a you-know-where-to-go, but he instead crosses himself, thanking God for continued existence, however sorrowful it may be.

They hunt down Hoffman's Taurus, a car he drives in between license suspensions. Rooster tilts the visor and keys plop down like a trinket in a gumball dispenser. He retrieves them off the front seat and locks all four doors.

"Taurus'd make a lousy derby car," remarks Amos. "Low frame."

Rooster slams a fist on the hood. "Forget about derby, okay? Try to think like someone on the run. If I know that old drunk keeps his keys in his car, so does..." He pauses. Of course. The bars are crowded with drunk, careless people who wouldn't notice their keys missing until they stumbled home and found themselves locked out of their house or apartment. And if Lance is bartending at Trapdoor, he makes anyone who orders more than two drinks place their keys in an empty Folgers coffee can. All those keys just begging to be stolen.

While they make their way back through the park, Rooster tells Amos his plan. They'll split up, hit the bars. Keep a low profile, though. "We're looking for Eden Hartz."

"Eden Hartz? Just ask Zeke. He's still hung up on her."

"Just..." Rooster grinds his teeth. "Let me worry about Zeke, okay? Find the woman. Bring her back to the junkyard without a ruckus."

Hoffman, spotting the two men, raises a hand like he's in school.

"My car keys," he says, massaging his throat. "Do you have them?"

The keys roll around Rooster's palm as he makes a fist, nickel-plated teeth grinding. He pitches them high in the air, a silvery arc that shines dully under the humming lampposts and nearby water tower and waning moon and freckle-faced Milky

Way. A plop sounds out as they land in the fountain, followed by Hoffman's sad protesting.

“Go fish,” says Rooster.

CHAPTER 5

The Wagon Wheel Tavern borders a county forest on the west side of Heritage, the building hidden from other establishments by a row of conifers. The stink of a nearby pond hangs over the clearing. Cars fill the parking lot. Music pours out the tavern's front door. Wolf whistles and cat calls too. Sid enters behind a drunk, groping couple.

Inside, customers lean against an L-shaped bar that's Tetrised alongside square card tables and bowlegged chairs. The ceiling's the exact color and texture of graham crackers, and hanging from the center is a wagon wheel-style chandelier. It's an old ranch house that's been gutted, walls sledgehammered and edges smoothed over with brown putty, to accommodate drinking and dancing. A cover band plays Skynyrd near the black-and-white tile dance floor, "Gimme Back My Bullets." When the singer gets to the line about whiskey-drinking and battleship-floating, three men at the bar dump shots into beer mugs and down the mixture.

John Wayne posters line the walls, freezing Sid momentarily. That familiar scowl and whatnot. Heritage is within spitting distance of Winterset, the town where John Wayne was born, and although the future movie star moved with his parents to California at age nine, Iowa clings to its celebrities. Most of the posters are from his Western flicks—there's only a single war picture, *The Green Berets*, half hidden behind the unplugged boombox. One cowboy poster shows the Duke leaning into his Winchester rifle, wearing a sweaty red button-up, tan vest, and yellow kerchief. The caption below reads WHEN YOU CALL ME THAT, SMILE.

Sid cozies up to the bar and orders a Bud Light draft, which is ten minutes arriving. Busy night. He orders an anticipatory second beer before he's three fingers deep into his first. Above the rows of liquor bottles, a lone TV rebroadcasts a Cardinals baseball game from earlier in the day; even so, closed captioning struggles with the announcer's script. After the seventh-inning stretch, just as Sid orders another Bud Light, a blonde woman with a braided ponytail moves alongside him. Her smile is a white triangle. She's wearing a spaghetti-strapped pink tank top, black bra straps exposed and cutting into her tanned shoulder peaks. Looks like she spends all day outdoors. Sun-kisses dot her cheeks, arc across the bridge of her dainty nose. Chicken pox scar on the corner of her right eye.

The bartender slaps down a beer that's more foam than liquid. Sid frowns, wondering how long it'll take for the bubbles to die down. On TV, a batter crushes one to left field, drawing applause from the bar crowd even though Sid gets the feeling he's the only one who doesn't already know the outcome. Instant replay, going frame by frame, shows the ball traveling just right of the yellow pole. A Cardinals fan sitting in the upper deck smiles and holds up his prize, which he caught barehanded.

"Nice catch," says the woman.

Sid shakes his head. "Slowing down a slow game."

The woman reaches in and takes Sid's foamy beer and tosses half of it back in one continuous gulp. Her tongue whisks away beer suds from her upper lip. "Nothing slow about derby, huh?"

"It has its moments."

“What does it feel like,” she says, “getting hit?”

“Like a shock to the heart.”

She places a hand on his forearm. Studs and rings pincushion her ears from lobe to cartilage. Eyes the color of those balsam firs outside. “I’m Eden.”

“Sid.”

Other drivers talk about how much they get laid after events. They call the women derby groupies, bleacher creatures. Post-derby, however, Sid always sees these same drivers wandering off alone. It’s like that on the track: lotta talk, little action.

“I wanted to ask how you won the race,” she says. “The other car drove off after your car died.”

“Overheated,” clarifies Sid, as if the distinction matters. The last remaining vehicle, that hulking Caprice Classic, drove around in a horseshoe after Sid rear-ended it. His own radiator cracked from an earlier collision, Sid cranked the heater, transferring warmth from engine to passenger compartment, and revved the gas, accelerating the water pump and fan. Avoided brake drag, which increases engine load. The little things. Green liquid sloshed out every time he turned, a sickly-sweet smell that pervaded the Buick’s interior. Minor damage; he’d weld the core shut before the next event. He struck the Caprice again, harder this time, and ended the derby.

“I thought it was the last car moving,” says Eden.

“Sure. But you gotta hit someone to win, and not just a love tap. Anyone that goes more than a minute without hitting another car is sandbagging. I hit the guy and he kept going, but he ran into the blocks.”

“Let me get this straight: you have to crash.”

“Yeah.”

“So basically the opposite of driver’s ed.”

People crowd around them as the band starts up another Skynyrd song. An acoustic guitar plunks away the opening notes to “The Ballad of Curtis Loew,” the crowd responding with raised, waving arms and delighted howls. Sid brushes some hands off him and deals a five-dollar-bill onto the bar.

“Give the lady whatever she wants,” he tells the bartender.

“Thanks,” says Eden, but in between the warm glow she emits, Sid catches a nanosecond of animal fear in her green eyes, what he imagines the look on a sparrow might be when the hawk descends. Eden scans the bar crowd and excuses herself to the bathroom.

As she disappears into the crowd, Sid says, to no one in particular, “Guess I could go a little myself.”

In lieu of urinals the Wagon Wheel Tavern proprietor installed a watering trough, filled with ice cubes and slightly angled to the drain side. Someone’s puking his guts out in the lone toilet stall. A guy who looks underage is already at the trough, head resting against the exposed brick wall. Sid steps beside him, regretting that he brought his beer into the latrine. Ice melts under the guy’s stream, liquid gurgling at the drain.

The door whacks behind Sid, a chemical smell he can’t quite identify entering the latrine. He senses a presence behind him, finishes his business, zips up, and turns around to face a squat man with a flat top, flanked by two cronies. Sid guesses ex-Army,

probably infantry: there's an M-16 tattoo running the length of the leader's forearm. Fixed to the barrel of the M-16 is an American flag. Could just be super patriotic, of course. Or a gun nut. A Marlboro Red soft pack sticks out of his t-shirt's pocket. Black goatee and dilated pupils. Cauliflower ears.

"Amos Attridge," says the man, as though his name should carry weight.

The underage kid mumbles something. He's jaked, three sheets to the wind, stumbling and fumbling to pull up his zipper.

"Get him outta here," Amos tells his two friends. The sausage-fingered, beer-gutted toughs escort the kid out, who protests, mildly, that he didn't get to wash his hands.

"Waitaminute," says Amos, reaching over and smacking the kid with the backside of his hand. It produces a meaty sound that bounces around the cramped latrine.

The kid, sobered up from the slap, looks like a scolded puppy. His face is red, quivering.

"Come in here again, see what I do. Now beat it."

The kid nods even as he's dragged away. Amos moves in closer to Sid. He's shorter but only by a few inches. His cronies return, the men standing shoulder to shoulder, and the big man named Amos says, "Did you know I won the derby here the last three years?"

It's him, Sid realizes. The Caprice Classic driver. Knock someone out at the start of an event, they chalk it up to bad luck. Most drivers are first-time thrill seekers with an old car and someone to impress on a Saturday night. They scoot around the track in

erratic, honeybee patterns, striking willy-nilly, happy just to be a part of the spectacle. High school seniors, frazzled fathers, cuckolded husbands. Rookies. No plan. But this driver, Amos Attridge, he'd been close enough to taste a victory.

“These guys—” Amos jerks a thumb toward the men beside him “—they were in the derby. We think you teamed up with another driver, split the profits afterwards.”

Sid imagines slapping his glass mug against Amos's face. He's seen it done before: leaves a swollen, purple welt at the point of impact, surrounding area nicked with cuts from the glass explosion. But there's the other two guys. The only egress is the bathroom door, which they're blocking, and a corner window with steel bars like a Tic-tac-toe game.

“I work alone,” says Sid.

“The hell you say.”

He tries a different tactic. “Saw your ink. You serve?”

Amos nods hesitantly.

“Me too,” says Sid. “Air Force, four and no more.”

“Army.”

“Guess you got out.”

Amos grunts. He looks Sid up and down, as though evaluating his military worth.

“Had a weight waiver, then they Article 15'd me for drugs. Just pot.”

“Other than honorable?”

“General.”

“Could've been worse,” says Sid. “Ghanny?”

“Three tours in Iraq. Tread head, till they stopped using tanks. It’s a flyboy war now—you shoulda stayed in.”

Sid nods and shrugs as if to say: maybe, maybe not. Amos uncurls his fists, and Sid thinks if ever there were a shot at muscling past him, this is it. But he waits.

“Chair Force, huh? I’ll cut you a break this one time, one vet to another. You gonna be at the Dogwood derby next week?”

Sid hasn’t had a rivalry in years, not since Hallelujah Jim retired. Sure, he tells Amos. “Dogwood it is. Every loser deserves a second chance.”

Amos frowns at the word “loser.” He nods his head toward the door and his cronies file out. Over his shoulder he says, “Be there or I’ll come find you on the road.”

At the sink, Sid palms his dark hair back with cold water, then splashes his face, fingers grazing a one-inch scar on his chin, the nick from busted windshield glass. From the accident. From all those years ago.

The guy in the stall groans, swears he’ll never drink again. “Is anyone out there?” comes a desperate voice.

When Sid exits the latrine he doesn’t see Amos Attridge or his cronies. He wonders if he’ll find them outside the Wagon Wheel, standing around his F-150 with crowbars or torque wrenches or Louisville Sluggers in hand. They’ll know right where to wait for him—hard going incognito when you’re hauling around a Buick with a dented white door.

Then Sid remembers Eden, the way she drank his beer and licked her lips. Unfortunately she’s gone as well. He hangs out near the bar, hoping she’ll return, but the

bartender comes over with another sloppily poured beer and says some guys were looking for him.

“Amos Attridge? He found me.”

“Listen, we don’t need that kind of trouble around here.”

“What trouble?”

“Aw, hell,” says the bartender. He grabs a wide-mouth Mason jar with a strip of masking tape stuck on the side, three dollar signs scribbled in with permanent marker.

Tip jar. Empty. “You see who took this? It was full when I turned around.”

Sid shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“No one respects honest work these days...”

“What kind of trouble is Amos Attridge?”

“Drug trouble,” says the bartender, a hint of resignation in his voice. He sets the empty tip jar down. “I pay to keep that crap outta the Wheel. Not preaching at you, just saying find another place for... whatever it is you’re doing. I’ll have to tell Rooster—he’s supposed to keep his bloodhounds at bay.”

“Got a guy named Rooster in this town?”

“Yeah.”

“And he has bloodhounds?”

The bartender’s lips tighten. “Mister, there’s plenty you dunno about Heritage. I advise you to shake the dust and don’t look back.”

“No worries,” says Sid, waving like a magician. He downs the foamy beer, peels off another five-dollar-bill, slides it in the tip jar, and presto, he’s gone.

Outside the air's chilled, wet with humidity. June bugs and tree frogs cling to the patio pillars. Coyotes, probably no more than a quarter mile away, yip and yowl and carry on. A slight breeze skirts through, rattling dead leaves and ATM receipts and old cigarette butts. Sid cautiously makes his way through the gravel parking lot, one eye out for Amos and his crew. He makes it to his truck unaccosted. Opens the door and there she is.

"Hello, stranger," says Eden, her legs, long and lean below denim cutoff shorts, hiked up on the dash. She's sitting in the middle of the bench, left arm stretched out and ready to cozy up next to him. Her yellow hair shimmers in the faint neon glow of the Wagon Wheel.

Sid figures he left a window down just enough for her slender arm to slink inside. He's made worse mistakes. "Where to?"

"Where you from?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not as much as where you're going."

Sid says he was thinking about sticking around town a few days. See the sights, all that.

"Doesn't get any better than this."

This woman isn't lacking for confidence. He eases into the truck, closes the door, smiles. She's breathtaking. He's glad he only had a couple three beers; this woman couldn't be handled drunk. Maybe not sober either but he's willing to try. He cranks the engine, pops his headlights on, and heads out.

Air floating through the cab is sweet with her perfume. Wildflowers. Springtime. Newness. Sid drives with his left hand only, his right hand inching over and covering Eden's exposed thigh. Goosebumps pepper her leg. He connects the dots. Only need to find a winding gravel road and a little moonlight. Been a good long while. He's waited long enough. Things are finally—

Someone coughs behind him.

Sid curses and slams on the brakes. He looks behind Eden, whose head is lowered and lips pursed. There's a kid, a boy about five or six, sitting in the back cab. Sid didn't notice him when he climbed in; he had other things on his mind. The boy scales the front seat and clings onto Eden. She was hiding him, Sid realizes.

"I'm guessing he's with you."

"My son," explains Eden, wriggling free of Sid's caress and placing the boy on her lap.

Sid pulls the truck and trailer off onto the gravel shoulder. His fingers dance on the steering wheel and he bites his lip and shakes his head and says, "Well, out you go."

"We just need a ride," says Eden. She sounds frightened, her eyes wide.

"This isn't a taxi service. I've got places to be."

"Just to Salt Lake City, that's it. I have a sister there and she'll put us up." Eden has her arms around her boy. "This is Bobby."

Sid looks askance at him. He's got his mom's delicate nose, her thick, straw-colored hair. ISU shirt with the bird mascot is about three sizes too big for him. Cute kid,

but still. Salt Lake's over a thousand miles just getting there. Three day round trip, at least. Let them take the Amtrak. Let them be someone else's problem.

"Please," she says. "I'll pay you, forty bucks. All the money I have."

He snorts. "Not a chance. I gotta find an auto body shop somewhere around here, someplace with a lift or a cherry picker. Buick ain't gonna fix itself."

"I'm begging you," says Eden, and although Sid doesn't look he can hear the tears welling up; it's in the crack of her voice. "Bobby's father—" she covers the boy's ears with her palms "—my husband got shot. He's dead. We're in trouble, Sid."

"Go to the police then. They get paid for this stuff."

"We can't," says Eden. "Not around here."

A hard luck story. Well. She's been lying to him ever since they met. Probably a con; the boy was supposed to rob him blind while Eden kept him distracted. What a couple degenerates. That or they're real hard up for cash. He leans over and opens the passenger door, avoiding eye contact. Time to ditch this town of sore losers and barflies and bartenders who can't pour a decent beer. Maybe next derby season will find those in Heritage slightly more hospitable.

"Fine," says Eden, anxiety and fear replaced with indignation. They exit the truck. "Don't help us." She slams the pickup door and whacks the frame twice, signaling that they're clear.

Rocks on the gravel shoulder crunch beneath Sid's tires. It's dark but a creamy swath of stars and an optimist's moon will guide Eden and Bobby back to the Wagon Wheel. He eyes them in the side mirror. Ditching a mom and her child in potential need

might be a new low for Sid. All for the sake of finding the guy behind the Trans Am, a faceless antagonist. Worse than that the car itself could be unrecognizable by now, mashed into a million little pieces and combed into junkyard dirt. Could be Sid's chasing his own tail, has been for a while now.

But—and there's always a *but*—Sid knows about hope. He was a young man when he enlisted; the Air Force feels like a lifetime ago. In a way, it is. Zero Week and his basic training instructor, a tireless, beer-gutted Texan, asked if Sid was “ready to be part of the killing.” Sid didn't know how to respond, so he did pushups until his arm muscles failed, then rolled over for flutter kicks. Dust swirled around him, clogging the polish of his combat boots. He wondered: am I? Am I ready to be part of the killing? You have a lot of time to think about things like that in basic training. In tech school and the regular Air Force too. If you emerge from war anywhere near the proximity of *hopeful*, you get the feeling you can accomplish a lot in this world. Even if all you want is revenge.

CHAPTER 6

“I’m an honest businessman,” says Rooster, pacing the kitchen of his singlewide trailer, “and your accusation borders on slander. That’s a crime in Iowa last time I checked.”

Amos Attridge sits in the center cushion of a paisley couch, the cushion sagging under his considerable weight. Amos has been using recently, observes Rooster: the big man’s eyes resemble eclipsed moons. Fingers twitch involuntarily. Pockmarks on his face. Amos keeps the weight on, but there are other ways you can tell. He asks Rooster who it was on the phone.

“A pain in the ass. But he did provide some valuable information.” Rooster’s wearing nothing but a yellow goldfish-embroidered bathrobe, cinched at the waist. Water beads glisten on his hairy chest.

They gave up on their search at 1:30. Rooster came home, showered, and waited for Amos’s arrival. Then he got the phone call. Amos walked in and collapsed on the couch about halfway through the conversation.

“The demolition derby winner, guy that beat you,” says Rooster. “What was his name?”

“Don’t think he mentioned it.”

“Well, what’d he look like?”

Amos squints hard. You can practically hear gears grinding inside his head. “Tall, dark. Kinda looked like an Indian, I guess.”

“Dot or feather?”

“Huh?”

Rooster walks over and pokes Amos’s forehead. *Thump!* The couch’s wooden frame whimpers as Amos sits fully upright.

“Dot—” and then, to illustrate the other option, Rooster brings three fingers upright behind his own head “—or feather? What kind of Indian was he?”

“I just meant he *looked* like an Indian. Uh, feather type. He’s got long black hair and dark skin and a frickin’ hard stare and all.”

Rooster continues pacing, jangling an enormous set of keys in his hand. A stray cat, cream-colored with a patch of black fur around her eye, sits atop Amos. Cats are always wandering around Rooster’s property. This one, she bolted inside when he opened the front door last week. Rooster’s been meaning to drown her in a five-gallon bucket of water, but something always comes up. Takes a while to fill the bucket, plus you need a lid or a sheet of plywood and a cinder block for weight. The cat’s tiny engine rumbles as Amos scratches behind her ears.

“Anything else about this guy?” asks Rooster.

“Said he was military, but it must’ve been a ways back. Because, you know. Long hair and all.”

Rooster sets the keychain on the laminate counter and pulls a can of tuna from his cupboard. He pivots in the trailer’s cramped kitchen, rummages through a drawer and exhumes a rusty can opener, one of those old models that looks like a lopsided, sharpened wrench.

It's two in the morning according to the oven clock. The slow drift of formaldehyde enters from the spare room, a bedroom retrofitted for taxidermy. Rooster's garnered quite a collection: white-tailed deer, turkey, a Canadian goose, coyote, pheasant, raccoon, rabbit. He had a bobcat but sold it to another collector. Heads cover the walls, bodies litter the floor. Mounting stands lean into corners. Offset jaw configurations and coon cuffs and Conibear traps dangle menacingly on door hooks. In one corner is a steel, fireproof safe filled with preserved human appendages: mostly toes, a few fingers. At first Rooster would mail them back to each victim, but he got tired of paying for postage

In the living room, piled on a wooden bookshelf, are instructional DVDs: *Tricking Tricksters* (volumes I-VIII), *Bustin' Coyotes*, and *Trap Anything, Anytime, Anywhere*, among others. Along with the DVDs Rooster keeps a complete Encyclopedia Britannica set, animal pelts resting lengthways on top the books. Notched, stemmed, even bifurcated arrowheads—legitimate findings, Mississippian and Woodland, not souvenir lookalikes—paperweight the animal fur in place. Over the front door a taxidermied owl judges silently from its perch. Rooster points the can opener at Amos.

“Do you believe in this operation? We're about to hit the bigtime, you know. I'm going to pump money into this town. Buy a restaurant or two. Build a strip club. Casino. Run for mayor. I'm a visionary, Amos, but even visionaries need help. I've got two boys over in Comstock that'll drive a car across state lines, no questions asked. You know what I'd get for a trunkful?”

“A lot?”

“Twenty-five grand minimum. Twenty-five with the right buyer. Best part is, nothing can be traced back here. These are all salvage title cars, like the Caprice I loaned you.”

Amos self-consciously eyeballs the window curtain. Rooster catches his movement and yanks the curtain back. Behind the trailer, illuminated by four security yard lights, lies an ocean of cars, trucks, vans, motorcycles, dirt bikes, boats, jet skis, and one crop duster, a yellow Air Tractor with a tarp draped over the cockpit. Parked near the gate is a hydraulic forklift, operable, used to stack vehicular frames when extra space is needed. Razor wire garnishes the chain-link fence, which encloses the one acre compound.

“Sorry,” says Amos.

“For what?”

“I’m...I don’t know.”

Rooster shakes his head and works the can opener. The stray cat, recognizing the punching sound and the scent of tuna, leaps off Amos, who picks at the shed fur on his lap.

“Sorry,” says Amos again.

The cat rubs her furry, warm body against Rooster’s exposed ankles. Mayor of Heritage was never something he considered up until a few years ago. He figures the town’s split: half think he’s an up-and-coming businessman, the other half a crook. These days, though, the social climate being what it is, the difference isn’t always black and white.

“We are friends, Amos, are we not? I value your friendship.” Rooster rubs his whiskered chin and grabs the first Encyclopedia. A to ANNO. He fans himself with a few pages. “Did you know that most animals can form platonic or sexual relationships, but only a select few are capable of genuine companionship?”

“Uh...”

“That’s what sets us above most animals. You have your exceptions: dolphins, horses—primates, of course—camels, elephants. Some animals can even make friendships with other species, going against their own biological imperatives to seek social contact.”

“Like dogs and cats,” says Amos.

“Sure,” says Rooster, and he sets down the tuna can on the linoleum floor. The stray cat pounces, lightning bolt reflexes. Smacking sounds escape her lips as she eats. “Cat raised among dogs thinks it’s a dog. Nature.” He reopens the drawer and exchanges the can opener for a .357 revolver. It’s silver with a barrel as thick as a roll of quarters. Thumbing the latch, he pops the cylinder and runs a thumb across the brass casings. 158 grain, full metal jacket. Still smells like campfire. When he snaps the cylinder back into place, Amos flinches.

“It’s okay,” says Rooster. He tucks the .357 into his robe’s waistband, cinches the cord tight. “I just want to check on something.” He collects his set of keys, steps into a pair of Carhartt boots, tugs the laces tight, and indicates that Amos should follow him outside.

“You too, furball,” says Rooster, and the cat, licking the tuna can clean, hesitates before bounding after them.

Outside the singlewide trailer, moths cover the yard lights in buckshot patterns. Crickets chirp, chirp, chirp. The ground’s wet but no longer soupy. Amos sidesteps old rain puddles that glisten with oil, fumbling with his cigarette lighter.

“Cowboy killers,” says Rooster, tsk-tsking.

Amos lowers his head and crumples the cigarette in his oversized fist, loose tobacco dropping like confetti. The cat paws at the midair tobacco.

Rooster has the gate triple locked, so it takes a minute for them to get inside. He leads Amos past an alley of stacked cars to the Plymouth Breeze. The shot out, burnt orange coupe sits adjacent to the forklift. Rooster again fumbles with his huge set of keys before conceding, hammering back the .357, and popping off a round into the trunk’s lock.

“Sheez!” yelps Amos. The stray cat skitters off and finds shelter under a broken down Corolla.

The bullet fails to unloose the trunk lock. Amos breathes heavily, then reaches down and rolls up a pant leg. From an ankle sheath he draws his boot knife, the blade flickering under the security lights. Rooster laughs as Amos inserts the blade into the mangled keyhole, wriggles it around, and pries the trunk open a crack.

“What?”

“They say don’t bring a knife to a gunfight,” says Rooster, and he laughs some more as he flips the .357’s cylinder. He works a fingernail under the spent shell’s lip, slides it out of the chamber and puts it in his robe’s pocket.

“Oh, yeah?” Amos says absentmindedly, but as he lifts the trunk he gasps.

The body inside is curled into the fetal position around a spare tire. Syrupy blood stains the trunk. His wounds have seemingly worsened since last night: lower back looks like it got scooped out with a post hole digger; white, spiny flecks dot a red and black crater, pink guts squirming through like disturbed earthworms. Body bloated with gas. Smell of spoiled hamburger. Rooster swishes a hand in front of his nose.

Flies scurry past Amos, who drops the boot knife and covers his open mouth. “Is that Zeke?”

“Remember when I told you to keep an eye out for Zeke’s wife, Eden? She was at the Wagon Wheel.” Rooster moves around Amos in methodical circles. “And guess who she was talking with? Your fine-feathered friend, the derby winner. Bartender says they were getting real cozy.”

“I didn’t see her there, Rooster. Her or the boy, I swear.”

He ignores Amos and keeps circling, keeps talking. “You didn’t see them because you were still thinking about the derby.”

“That’s not how—”

Rooster grabs a fistful of shirt collar and yanks Amos close. He draws the .357 and presses it into the big man’s groin. “She’d sell my soul to the devil for a buck-fifty. Loose ends, Amos, come around and tie the noose.”

The forklift's overhead guard shadows Amos's face from the nose down, a train robber's handkerchief disguise. His breath smells sour. The guy's a tank. Rooster pulls him closer and they sway together like impassioned dance partners.

"I know—I know where to find the driver. Dogwood derby, next week. We got a rematch."

Rooster releases Amos. "Next week..." He rubs his whiskered jaw thoughtfully. Might be his best shot to figure out where Eden and Bobby went. Find the guy, dig out those wire cutters, start with the pinkie and end with the hallux. Right foot first, driving foot, then the left if it takes that much. When he spills his guts, get rid of him. No one would blink if some derby drifter vanished; in fact, with any luck, Zeke's murder would be pinned on him. After all, near as he can tell this mystery man hauled off Eden and Bobby. Might be he's the future prime suspect of a triple homicide. This could all work out brilliantly.

Amos cowers near a stack of battered cars and smooths out his wrinkled shirt collar. Rooster shakes his head. "A week is a lot of time for things to go wrong. I'm a trapper, Amos, but I can hunt. When a prize buck or trophy tom is somewhere out in the woods, you send your best hunting dog out to stir things up."

Amos nods. The cat slowly creeps out from under the car and rejoins the party. She meows loudly, pitifully, her tail curling into a question mark.

"That's you, Amos. My very best hunting dog. Man's best friend. The friend who won't stop shaking bushes until something stirs up." He wipes the .357's grip on his bathrobe. "Not sure your head is in the right space right now, though."

Rooster flips the gun around, gripping the barrel and extending the butt like a handshake toward Amos, who cocks his head. The cat sniffs apprehensively at Amos's muddy work boots as, reluctantly, he accepts the pistol. Looks more like a derringer in his oven mitt hands.

“Shoot the cat,” says Rooster.

“What?”

“Stop asking questions and shoot her.”

Amos opens his mouth, but then closes it without issuing a sound. He peers down at the cat. Tears well up in his eyes. Rooster crosses his arms and nods. The cat bobs her head once, twice. Amos takes aim, the .357 trembling. It's a humid night and sweat coats his neck, a white sheen.

“No,” says Rooster.

Amos sighs relief, his brawny shoulders dropping.

“Not like that. Get closer,” instructs Rooster. “Take a knee. You might miss if you fire from there.”

As instructed, Amos kneels. Someday, Rooster will push Amos too far and find out the limits of his loyalty. This scares Rooster. He's in love with the feeling.

The .357 hovers over the cat's head. Droplets of sweat from Amos's palm slide down the gun's metallic length. The cat licks the salty barrel. Even after eating that can of tuna, she's still hungry.

CHAPTER 7

A one-eyed Saturn cruises by, chrome rims, windows down, outstretched arms like a curious swan's neck and head. Teenagers on a pleasure ride. Sid pulls his rig onto a farmer's culvert and puts the transmission in park. His fingers drumline the steering wheel. Mosquitoes dance in the white of his headlights; the night air cooled quickly and rain is inevitable. Even the insects know it. Reminds him of working mids back at Whiteman AFB, where the temperature always dropped just before the sun arose and barn swallows swooped down from their hangar stoops to eat mosquitoes, bottleflies, boxelder bugs.

It was after a night like this that he first met Jess. Second Lieutenant Jessica R. Dubois, still a butter bar. Having finished his 2300-0700 shift, the USAF expected him to participate in mandatory group-wide PT on the flightline. He worked propulsion—a fancy name for aircraft mechanic—and she, an operations lieutenant. The entire group ran a 5k around the cordoned-off flightline, Sid and Jess going stride for stride, her insisting she'd beaten him, and Sid, arguing with an officer, telling her no, no way in hell. A flight chief came over to berate Sid but Jess intervened, demanding a rematch. The rematch turned into their first date.

Sid shakes his head, unwilling to live through the memory tonight. Ever since the car crash, his life has spiraled. He can track the digression easily. A brief waltz with alcohol. His fist buried in walls. Then he lost his job at the guard unit and, following unemployment, left his therapist and found a new catharsis, one that didn't require talking. Demolition derby.

In the six years since the accident Sid's covered a good chunk of the fifty-some thousand square miles that is Iowa with nothing to show for it, but he tells himself every morning: could be the next town, the next junkyard, the next auto body shop. Eden and Bobby are at best a distraction; at worst, if she isn't BSing about her husband getting shot, they could get him mixed up in something he won't walk away from. Closing his eyes, he pictures spotting their names on the front page of some local newspaper when he's searching for Trans Ams in the classifieds section. Eden and Bobby. A mother and her little boy...the father, he'd been killed the night before...no one bothered to help them. Why'd they have to tell Sid their names? Jackknifing the trailer back onto the highway, he heads back toward the lights of Heritage with a feeling he'll regret this decision, and soon.

Yellow lines down the center of the road have faded into hollow stripes. He passes the Wagon Wheel, head on a swivel. The trees are dark, tangled outlines. Ripe with prairie fire blossoms. His nose tickles. When at last his headlights fall over the two wanderers, Eden whisks Bobby off the shoulder and down into the cattails.

Sid wonders if he's doing the right thing, whether this Good Samaritan gesture will assuage his guilt. He spins his rig around again and opens the passenger door for them. Too late to change his mind now. He's committed. He honks once, twice. Eden and Bobby crawl from the ditch and into the pickup truck, her apprehensively, him less so. She manages a feeble thank you, no more.

"I'll take you part of the way," he says, reluctant to promise any specific distance.

They stop at an all-night Casey's General Store on the far reach of town. No other customers, inside or out. While the truck's fueling, they step inside the gas station. Country-western music seeps from the ceiling speakers. Fluorescent lighting gives the white tile floor a yellow feel. Bobby pokes around the candy aisle until an entire boxful of Jolly Ranchers avalanche onto the tile floor, clicking and clacking like rolled dice. He grins sheepishly at Sid and Eden. They pick out water, peanut M&M's, and the last two slices of stale pizza in a cylindrical warmer.

"Can I get this?" asks Bobby, holding up a Hot Wheels car. 1969 Chevelle SS, painted red with black and blue flames on the hood.

"Good pick," says Sid.

"Put it back," says Eden. "We can't afford toys right now."

Sid reaches for the toy car. Ninety-nine cents. "I'll pay for it."

"It's okay. We can do without."

Bobby's shoulders slump as he walks defeated down the aisle. He searches for the peg he pulled the toy from.

"We should eat in the truck," says Eden, turning to Sid. "On the move."

The gas jockey, an older woman with a hunched back and sparse hair like corn silk, regards them with mild suspicion. She huffs loudly, purposefully, leaning over the counter and glaring down the candy aisle. Sid drops a couple twenties on the counter, but Eden insists on paying their fair share. She digs out a crumpled ten.

"Save it," says Sid, thinking if she can't afford a ninety-nine cent toy car, she needs ten bucks worse than he does.

“Do I know you?” the gas jockey asks Eden.

“Everyone knows everyone in this town,” says Eden. “That’s the problem.” She about-faces and whisks Bobby outside. The bell over the door chimes. Country-western music weeps on.

“Huh,” says Sid, rolling out another bill. “Keep the change.”

He gets back to the truck just as the fuel pump clicks off. The boy wants to sit beside Sid but Eden says no, she rides in the middle. She sits on the hump and buckles him in, then herself. Sid unplugs the nozzle, reholsters it, and they’re off again, westward bound. The lights of Heritage grow dim behind them.

“So you’ll take us to Salt Lake City?” asks Eden, running her finger along the dash.

“Not exactly,” says Sid. “But I’ll make sure you get there.”

The dash clock shows 2:58. The sky clouded over while they were in Casey’s: pitch black, no stars. The F-150’s headlights cut an hourglass shape through the Iowa night. Fireflies blink over unmowed meadows. Foxtail grass sways under barbwire fence. Bobby shrieks, half disgust and half delight, when a June bug slaps the windshield and leaves a watery splotch.

“Okay,” says Eden. “Where are we going, then? How far?”

“Cripes, lady, you ask a lotta questions.”

Bobby pulls the toy car—the one Sid could swear he saw him put back in Casey’s—from his pocket and rips off its plastic and cardboard packaging.

Sid flaps his lips like a horse. “Shoplifting? Classy.”

“It’s no big deal,” says Eden.

If they’re so strapped for cash, why’d she pony up the ten bucks? Sid doesn’t even bother asking. The sooner he gets rid of them the better. He sets the cruise control at fifteen over the speed limit, the F-150 lurching forward after a slight protest. Beside him, Eden tenses. Her knees press together.

Suddenly Sid hears a thud, a metallic scrape; when he glances into the side mirror sparks arc off the blacktop. He pumps the brakes and hits his hazards, screeching to a stop half on the shoulder, half off. Red lights pulsate, glowing on the white object in the middle of the road.

His Buick door.

“The hell,” says Sid, hopping out and racing back. All that clobbering must’ve weakened the weld points. Or maybe something else did.

He pitches the door in the truck bed and walks to the open door. Inside, Eden has her feet propped up on the dash. Gray haloes outline her toes. Sid blinks, his heart caught in his throat. He swallows it down.

“Get your feet the hell off the windshield.”

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

“You tried putting the boy in the demo car.” Plain statement, not an accusation.

“No,” says Eden in a frightened voice, wriggling back into her shoes. Then: “We were gonna stow away back there, but that thing’s a death trap.”

“Not if you know what you’re doing.” Sid shakes his head. Woman’s stronger than she looks: wrenched that door so it sat like a loose tooth, waiting for a few jolts on

the road to break free. He decides not to press the point—a stick welder will fix things up in no time—and they pull back on the road. He reaches forward and erases her toe prints from the windshield. Gone. Using his thumb he clicks the coast button until they're dialed in at fifty-five.

As Eden relaxes her posture, she says, "So? Are we driving through the night?"

"Going to my friend's house out in the country. Couple hours away, near Comstock. He'll have an extra car in his barn."

"I'd pay you, of course."

"What, another ten bucks? Forget it."

Eden considers this briefly. "Thank you for delaying your car repairs."

"No thanks necessary. Hank—that's his name—he's got a cherry picker for my Buick. Any car, no matter how bad shape it's in, he can fix it up. More of a two birds, one stone kinda thing."

"You need his help?" asks Eden. "Don't you fix up cars for your races?"

"Derby, not a race."

"Whatever."

"I patch stuff together so it doesn't fall off when someone hits me. But Hank, he makes things look pretty. I paint-by-numbers, Hank's Grant Wood—an artist."

They pass by a sign for Dogwood, which is less than twenty miles south. Sid again thinks of his latrine confrontation. Perhaps leaving Heritage is a good thing—that beefcake Army vet might twist him into a pretzel if they crossed paths again. Not far after the Dogwood turnoff they drive over the Nodaway River on a rickety one-and-a-half-lane

bridge, the Buick-laden trailer shimmying behind them. Posts along the guardrails are worn out, as frayed as old toothbrushes. People call these “chicken bridges” on account of their narrowness; when two cars meet, one must yield. The chicken. Sid sets his teeth and tells himself it’s better to settle scores on the derby track. He’ll knock Amos Attridge out in the first minute.

Sid adjusts the rear view mirror. Bobby, having finished his midnight snack, pizza chased with M&Ms, yawns and stretches. His lips sputter a few times as he drives the Hot Wheels up and down his thigh, but then he shoves the toy into his front pocket. He leans against the window, pillowing his head with a cocked forearm, eyelids fluttering, sleep approaching.

“And this Hank guy,” says Eden, “he’ll just give us a vehicle?”

“Sure.”

“That’s some friend,” says Eden. “You live with him?”

“I stay wherever I can find a place.”

Eden peeks over her shoulder into the extended cab. As she takes in the pillow, suitcase, and blanket with cotton guts oozing out, she says, “Oh—you live in your truck?”

“I sleep outside in the truck bed some, under the stars,” says Sid, slightly annoyed at Eden’s reaction. “Don’t like being tied down.”

Eden leans away from Sid, covers up her sleeping son. “Okay, okay.”

They drive a few silent miles. The blacktop’s vacant except for a possum whose eyes shine and tail flicks as it scurries off into the overgrown ditch.

Eden says, “I never left Iowa. Can you believe that? Never once been across the border, not even for fireworks. My sister had the right idea, moving to Utah as soon as she graduated high school. I would have gone too, when I graduated, but then I started working at the café, partied a little, then Bobby came along and...well, you know.” She finger-combs Bobby’s hair. “Given a hundred chances, I’d’ve made the right call ninety-nine times. We were happy for a while, me and Zeke, till he fell in with Rooster.”

“Rooster, huh? Only stayed in town a fistful of hours and heard his name twice.”

“He’s the one who shot Zeke. Years ago Zeke told me stories about what they got into. Said Rooster cut the pinkie toes off some Winterset high-schoolers who burned him for an eight ball. An eight ball! Few grams, couple hundred bucks at best. Then he mailed them back their own toes in a greeting card envelope.”

“The hell,” says Sid, making a face.

Eden squints out into the darkness. “Can we listen to music or something?”

Almost automatically, Sid snaps the radio on. It powers up to an AM station he has preprogrammed, strings and wind instruments filtering through the F-150’s speakers.

“Vivaldi,” says Sid. “Four Seasons. This is summertime—allegro non molto.”

“Oofta,” says Eden, making a face. “Serial killer music.”

“Look who found their sense of humor.”

Eden blows a raspberry. Vivaldi’s first summer movement concludes, all rousing violins and staccato cello, and the classical radio station bleeds into the next song without DJ interruption. Sid likes the station but wishes they’d play more than just piecemeal

parts of each symphony. E-flat piano chords tinkle the airwaves, slight static humming in the background.

“Chopin’s nocturne,” says Sid. Opus 9, No. 2. An old favorite.

Eden twists the dial, LED numbers ticking down and landing on a classic rock station.

“Hey!”

“Shh,” she says. “You’ll wake up Bobby. This is KFUN. Should come in steady for a few miles. They play eighties from midnight to sunrise, call it ‘Living After Midnight’ like that song.”

Sid tightens his grip on the steering wheel as she adjusts the volume knob and hums along. Strange way to act for someone whose husband just got killed. He tells her as much.

“You don’t know anything about me.” There’s an edge to her voice. “Don’t tell me how I should feel.” She cranks the volume up, rousing Bobby, who puts a hand over his left ear. She taps her foot and whistles along, mostly empty breeze coming off her lips. Rapping her knobby knees like they’re bongo drums is the last straw for Sid. He reaches in and flips the station back to classical. She groans.

“Great. So who’s this?”

But Sid has no idea who the composer is. It sounds like Satie’s “Gymnopédies,” but he doesn’t remember it being so sad, so drawn out. The piece has a dolorous rhythm, three-quarter time, alternating between the major seventh chords. Subdominant G

followed by tonic D. Yes, Satie. But it sounds different tonight. After a while Sid can't stand it any longer. He powers down the radio.

"Can't get that last one, Mr. Name That Tune?" says Eden.

"Here's an idea," says Sid. "We don't talk anymore. I drive. You rest."

"Gruh-um-pee," she mutters.

The F-150's cruise control burps as they ascend a hill. Out yonder thunderclaps preamble a rainstorm; deep, ominous bass rumbles far away, miles upon miles, maybe even over the border and into Nebraska. Eden asks Sid if he thinks the storm will come this way, toward them, and Sid says yeah, it usually does.

CHAPTER 8

Rooster, now clad in jeans and a KFUN t-shirt, steps outside just in time to see Amos driving some nondescript sedan down the road, Zeke's lifeless body cocooned in a tarp and stuffed in the trunk alongside a spool of thick, galvanized wire and four cinder blocks. No rope—water will eat away at the cords over time. A long lonely drive to Twelve Mile and back, but if Rooster remembers anything from Sunday school, it's the importance of penance. Let him sulk. And if things go belly up, Amos's fingerprints are all over the murder weapon, which is now safely tucked away in Rooster's safe.

He patrols the perimeter of his junkyard. A misnomer, perhaps. Not exactly a junkyard—he's got some fine machinery in there, topnotch, really—but he finds the projection of too-good-to-be-true lemons and rusting scrap heaps advantageous to his operation. No one minds him much, potential customers or other. Law enforcement mostly leaves him alone; only once was he pestered, and that came from the narcos, DNE, not the local level.

Rooster keeps a few wire mesh traps on the back side of his property. With a spring-loaded trap door on one side and a swiveling handle for relocation purposes, the traps were designed for minks, squirrels, or rabbits. Varmints. Rooster chuckles, thinking back to Amos and the stray cat. He really didn't think Amos had it in him. For all he knew, Amos would turn the .357 his way, blow a hole in his chest the size of a tuna can, cradle the cat in his baseball glove-sized hands, and return to his apartment in town. He's a veteran, after all. Unpredictable. Shot people, got shot at, saw an RPG hit a buddy right between the numbers. His sense of loyalty, however, never faltered, and shortly after

getting booted from the Army, after the plea deal—that whole mess—Rooster convinced him to take up selling meth.

The third animal trap Rooster checks houses a squirrel whose bushy tail perks. Rooster picks up the cage and tilts it for a better look. The squirrel slides to the back corner, spreading out its padded feet. An eastern fox squirrel, Rooster determines, the most common around southern Iowa. Brown-gray body with an orangish underbelly. He's a little guy, adolescent, probably no more than a pound or so.

“Just a little rascal,” Rooster muses out loud.

Morning sunlight pinches through the pines behind the junkyard. Not much grows in the clay soil Rooster's trailer sits on. Even hogweed and dandelions and other unwantables find it hard to take root. Behind the tool shed, in the field of needlegrass, deer will sometimes come to lick dew from the tall stalks. A half mile into the woods, a winding ravine funnels rainwater and melted snow into a pond. Animal traps—most of them more menacing than the catch-and-release variety in which the squirrel resides—cover the deer trails and water paths that zigzag through the pine trees. Not only does Rooster catch a handful of critters every month, but the traps dissuade anyone from sneaking around his property. While the snares and Conibear traps don't pose any huge threat to human trespassers—a welt at most—if an offset jaw trap clamped down on someone's leg, they might bleed out before help arrived.

Technically some of this trapping is illegal, but Rooster never worries, not since a dumpster-diving raccoon bit Steve Moss and gave him rabies. DNR turned a blind eye as townsfolk purged the city limits—and a ways beyond—of any and all pests. Rooster's

taxidermy business boomed for a while. Iowa's "nuisance policy" has been, in many parts of the state, interpreted rather loosely.

"You're not a nuisance, are you?" Rooster sets down the cage and opens the door. After a moment of hesitation the squirrel jets out and scurries up a juniper. Green branches shake for a moment, then come to rest. The morning is still.

In the last live-animal trap Rooster finds another squirrel, this one considerably larger. Only a few golden kernels remain on the corn cob bait. He starts to open the cage but the squirrel lunges at his fingers, nearly getting its buck teeth around Rooster's thumb. Rooster yanks his hand away.

"A fighter," he says, chuckling. Usually he pulls the squirrel out by the tail and slams its head against the base of a tree a few times. That does the trick, plus it preserves the hide for the most part. Unfortunately Rooster's leather gloves are hanging from a hook in the tool shed.

No problem. Last week Rooster shoveled up a roadkill squirrel on South Main Street. Pancaked body, but the head—what a magnificent skull! Bushy black whiskers. Perky ears. And, in its death throes, a curved smile. Rooster pinched off the head and stuck it in his freezer, right next to a stack of TV dinners and Neapolitan ice cream.

"This won't hurt a bit," he promises.

Rooster props the cage on a tree stump and angles a boot inside, wriggling his steel-toed edge around until it hovers over the squirrel's head. A faint crunch as he steps down. He scrapes his boot on the bottom of the cage until he's satisfied.

"There," says Rooster. "That's better."

But before he can fish the animal out, a rustling in the distance captures his attention. Could be an animal; could be burglars, someone brave or foolhardy enough to think they can avoid his traps. Probably a punk kid looking to boost car parts or a couple hoping to have sex in the crop duster. Apparently, that's a thing with the younger generation. They brave his traps, cut a hole in the fence with tin snips, sneak through the yard and into the airplane. The most daring location in Rooster's hey-day was on top of the water tower, though he thoroughly disbelieved anyone actually accomplished this because the ladder, cage-style, was kept padlocked. He took Danielle Lee out there once, back in high school, but they gave up quickly and settled for a quilt strewn across the forest floor. But today's kids are more restless, more reckless. At twenty-nine, Rooster's just beginning to notice the changing of the guard. Technology's been updated along with attitudes and philosophies. He never figured this side of thirty would feel so old.

From where he stands, he can see the crop duster, a big yellow eyesore in the middle of the junkyard, wingspan fifty feet. Too big for the tarp he's thrown over it. An Air Tractor AT-504, spray plane/trainer combo, which means it has side-by-side seating with dual flight controls—kind of like drivers ed cars. Supposedly it can get up past 150 mph. Came with the junkyard, the man selling him the property assuring Rooster that it was worth six figures, easy. Thus far Rooster's had no serious offers, though he hopes to one day find better use for the plane than an x-marks-the-spot for horny teenagers.

He hunkers down and strafes the row of pine trees on the edge of the woods. If someone is out here, he'll have to bust them up good. Take a toe or two, send a message to other would-be prowlers. Junkyard's off-limits. Can't have someone pop open a trunk

and discover one of his meth labs. He grits his teeth and brushes back a juniper's skirt and—

“Hell,” he whispers.

Their hooves are clouded by a wispy, low-hanging fog. Whitetail deer. Looks to be a family unit: doe, one-antlered buck—big guy, looks like he's pushing a hundred pounds—and their fawn. The offspring has a silky, reddish coat with white spots. Odd seeing a deer family together in June. Bucks usually hightail it after the doe population finishes estrus or, at the very latest, around April or May when fawns arrive. Rooster crouches lower to the ground.

“*Fee-bee.*” His best bird call.

Daddy deer cocks his head and lowers his shoulders. The fawn continues nosing around the ground, hunting for elderberry and goldenrod or whatever shrubs they might come across. Rooster recalls that fawns are born odorless—attract fewer predators that way—and in fact the doe will even abandon her newborn fawn for several days so her scent doesn't rub off.

Inevitably Rooster's thoughts turn to Eden and Bobby. Mother and son, now without a father. Where could they have gone? And what about Zeke's behavior? When he plowed through the front door brandishing his nine millimeter, face red and sweating, Rooster laughed and asked why he should give Zeke anything. “You know why,” said Zeke. Of course. Payback. A jilted lover. Years ago, Rooster had a one-night stand with Eden while Zeke was in county lockup. She'd needed a new car or something. But that was so long ago—everyone was getting high. Surely Zeke, who himself ran around

behind Eden's back, could understand. "Forgive and forget," Rooster told Zeke, shrugging. That was when Zeke pulled the trigger. But nothing happened. The gun jammed.

Rooster breathes a much delayed sigh of relief. Never trust a semi-auto. He pictures Zeke outside his trailer, riding the pistol's slide. To avoid the loud metallic *chk-chk* sound of the first bullet being inserted, you hold onto the slide as it moves forward, reducing speed. Problem is, riding the slide can improperly seat the bullet. Jam. Just another reason to go with a revolver.

The deer family tenses up, seconds away from darting off. Rooster's seen it a hundred times, the way their bodies freeze in anticipation. Their black eyes, unmoving. Tails vertical. He makes a finger-gun and plugs the buck right through the heart.

"Pow," he whispers.

Even with a body shot like that, some bucks will keep running. They're technically dead—brain's ceased functioning—but with muscle memory and whatnot, their legs carry them through field and forest. Rooster drops his thumb as he mimics shooting the doe right between the eyes.

But when he gets to the fawn, he freezes. A thought occurs. It was something Zeke said outside Eden's house. "I've been doing your work for years now." Initially Rooster thought he meant pushing meth, but now, as he crouches below a juniper, piney branches tickling his neck, staring at the nimble fawn, he wonders if Zeke had meant something else entirely.

CHAPTER 9

Eden wakes up in a panic. She feels for Bobby, who is still asleep beside her, and clutches him tight. Outside, the first flicker of sunlight ambles over the horizon. The storm's passed—she slept right through it. Long frowns streak the truck's windshield. Gravel rumbles beneath the floorboards.

They speed past a diamond-shaped sign that announces GRAVEL ENDS. Deep country, nothing but woods and creeks and wild animals. A tinge of claustrophobia wells up inside her, a dormant feeling that hasn't resurfaced in over twenty years. Yet she remembers. Visiting her grandfather at the VA hospital and sobbing uncontrollably—a crying jag, her mom called it—when the elevator doors sealed. Back then, she didn't understand the crippling fear. It overwhelmed her. Today, she can bury it.

They drive a few more miles and the only manmade structure she sees is a windmill. No buildings. Eden's pulse quickens. Did she trust the wrong guy? Is he bringing them out here to leave them, kill them, or worse?

She sneaks a peek at Sid. Eden chose him because he wasn't a local, didn't look like he was mixed up with Rooster. Time was running low. She spotted Amos Attridge, Rooster's favorite yes man, searching for her and Bobby at the Wagon Wheel. Zeke told her stories about Amos, how he once sat on a man during a barroom brawl and pummeled his face until the man fell into a coma. At the trial Rooster testified that the man had first disparaged the U.S. Army, then called Amos a baby killer, and finally, attacked him with a broken beer bottle, slurring "En garde, a-hole." It was just ludicrous enough to be true. Amos was given six months of deferred judgment on a lesser charge.

But Sid. Just a drifter. Smells like the old motor oil that's worked its way into his knuckles ridges. His face is weathered, sunburnt and chapped. Dark whiskers scruff his face except for a gummy white line on his chin. Black hair, five or six inches of it, stays back not because of product, but because he doesn't wash his hair often enough. He seems like the gentle sort. Harmless, even mildly attractive. Dark brown eyes. Strong chin. Thirty-something. A haircut and shower and he'd make women—those attracted to nice guys—swoon like schoolgirls.

Of course, he also listens to terrible music and crashes cars for fun. An orbital rim fracture on his right eye, healed in a way that gives him a mean, uneven gaze. That chin scar. An edge to his words. Could be a devil as easily as an angel. What did her old pastor always say? Nothing is bigger or smaller than the divide between heaven and hell. But for now, it's enough that Sid came back, that he chose to help her after sex was off the table.

The F-150 bounces over the unmaintained road. Eden sits up and wriggles her shorts lower, trying in vain to conceal a little more leg. She wishes her knees weren't so knobby—might as well be two baseballs teed there. Her feet ache, toes crammed into blue polka-dotted kitten heels a half size too small, but hell if she'll buy a ten. Size ten shoes make her feel gangly.

At last an old farmhouse comes into view. Eden massages her stiff neck as she takes it all in: Colonial-style, with shingles like a Jack-o'-lantern's smile and two chimneys on the roof. Spiderwebs clutter the corner eaves. Rusted-out Chevy truck under a makeshift carport. Nearby barn shuttered, front door planked. A chicken coop and tool shed sit behind the barn. At first Eden thinks it must be some abandoned property, and

worry creeps in again as Sid parks the F-150, but then she notices the yard's been mowed recently—down to a crew cut and grass blades sprinkle the driveway. Meaning even if the buildings aren't maintained, the yard is. Someone's home.

“Wake up,” she tells Bobby. She wants him alert, just in case. “We're here.”

The sun, hidden behind a crop of maples and hickories, yellows a thin strip of low-hung clouds. It's just about pretty enough to make Eden forget why they're here. As Bobby rubs sleepy dirt from his eyes, she wonders how much he knows. How much does she *want* him to know? That he hasn't asked about Zeke concerns her—perhaps an indication that he already understands what happened.

Eden and Bobby follow Sid, who's making for the porch. A single oak stands out front, tall and strong, with two main branches stretched out like welcoming arms. Honeysuckle shrubs perfume the early morning air.

“Will this Hank be expecting us?”

“I'm usually only up this way in the winter, but he'll probably—”

Sid shuts up fast and raises his arms shoulder height. A blue-black barrel pokes out the front door, the distinct *shu-shuck* of a pump shotgun interrupting the calm morning. Eden's heart thuds as she moves Bobby behind her.

“Be on your way if you know what's good for you!”

“Hank,” says Sid, arms still raised. “You crazy old... It's just me.”

“Sid? Who's that with you?”

“A scared mom and her boy. Put that thing away, will you?”

The barrel retracts into the house. The porch door snaps open and out comes Hank, the biggest black man Eden's ever seen. He's maybe fifty, maybe a well-lived sixty. Caesar-style gray hair and shirtless, wearing nothing more than pajama bottoms, and although he has a gut, it's a solid hill of one. His swollen biceps and broad shoulders move slowly but with confidence, like a locomotive powering from its station. USAF tattooed on his right shoulder. Something about his demeanor calms Eden, although she can't quite put her finger on what.

“Wasn't expecting you until at least October. Oughta know better than to sneak up on me, Sid.”

“Guess you missed my rig out front. When you gonna get glasses, old-timer?”

Hank crosses his arms. His fingers are the size of railroad spikes. Looks like he could John Henry a mile of track without breaking a sweat. He motions the trio inside.

Moving past Hank, Eden catches a peppery scent she associates with cheap shaving cream. No rug in the entryway. No shoe shelf, so she keeps hers on. If Hank's property seemed a little vacant, the farmhouse interior is downright spartan: a single chair and couch furnish the living room and there's an absence of knickknacks on the hanging ledge. Only one picture adorns the wall, a shadow box displaying something she can't quite distinguish. Below that sits a bookshelf with three evenly spaced shelves. Fairly stocked with books but there's no television, just a big boxy record player in the corner.

Sid hauls Eden and Bobby's duffel bag, a small green thing with a busted zipper, into an upstairs bedroom. Hank breaks off from the group to don a t-shirt. Across the

hallway is a room barren save for a small mattress on the floor, and Eden wonders if that's where Sid sleeps when he's here.

"Thanks," she says, shoving the duffel bag under the bed with her heel, not wanting Bobby to poke around inside. She's kicked most bad habits since she and Zeke separated, all but the occasional cigarette, smoked hurriedly and during Bobby's nap times or the once-in-a-blue-moon she trusted the boy in Zeke's care. Zeke had threatened legal action, telling Eden he wished to spend more time with his boy, but either he'd been wary of the courthouse (located kitty-corner to the police station) or had lost interest in pursuing his paternal obligations altogether. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but how many times is the exact opposite true?

Bobby curls into a C-shape on the bed, caressing a fluffy pillow. Before blinking into oblivion, even though it's good morning already, Bobby turns and says good night.

Hank pulls a folded quilt out of the closet and sets it at the foot of the bed. "Just in case," he says, nodding toward the rattling window unit. It was hot inside when they arrived but the air conditioner's going full bore, a clicking sound in its belly like a vacuum cleaner eating spare change. The window above fogs over as cool air sails around the bedroom.

Eden nods and sweeps her bangs off her forehead. Bobby's sawing logs.

"Sorry about the greeting," says Hank. "Not exactly Midwest hospitality."

"No problem." She scoots back on the edge of the bed, mattress springs coiling underneath her.

“Get a few tweakers out here looking to boost machinery or anhydrous. Steal anything not tied down. Anything they can sell or smoke.”

“Really,” says Eden, “it’s okay.”

Hank draws the curtains. “Stays pretty dark in this room. Guess you’re staying for a while.”

Eden raises her eyebrows at Sid.

“Right. Almost forgot. Hank, still got that wagon in the barn?”

“I was going to tell you—Buick looks like crap.”

“Can’t iron out the wrinkles.”

“Lost a door too? Should’ve let Hallelujah Jim keep that rust bucket.”

“A bet’s a bet.” Sid crosses his arms. “Door’s in the truck, just needs re-welded. Got another derby back in Dogwood next weekend. No,” and he chin-nods toward Eden and Bobby, “*they* need a car. Something that’ll at least make Utah.”

Hank grunts as he considers this. Eden can’t get a good read on him. His politeness—Midwest hospitality, as he put it—feels rigid, perfunctory. People in Heritage wave to one another when they pass by on a dusty road, whether they know each other or not; sometimes, it’s just easier than not waving. That’s how Hank’s politeness feels: a burden. She gets the feeling that Hank doesn’t want them there anymore than he wants a tornado to rip through.

“I was going to cannibalize that old Subaru for parts,” Hank says. “Huh. Might be able to get it road-worthy.”

“We’ll get started,” says Sid. “I’m sure you want to be on your way.”

The two men depart, wooden floor sighing under their boot heels. When the front door slams, Eden pulls out the cash she stole from the Wagon Wheel's tip jar. She counts it again. Thirty-three dollars. That's all she has to her name. Probably shouldn't've have chipped in for fuel. But it'll be enough. She's resourceful.

She pries her heels off and lets her feet breathe. Finally. Next she retrieves the duffel bag from under the bed and finds her Marlboro Menthols. Slaps the pack against her wrist before removing the cellophane. Tearing off the foil strip, she pinches out two cigarettes, one in her mouth and one tucked behind her ear. She spreads the quilt over Bobby's lower half and runs a hand through his hair.

Making her way through the farmhouse, she pauses to peruse Hank's bookshelf. It's been said you can tell a lot about people just by observing the books they keep. Paperback mystery novels, Air Force protocol books, *War and Peace*, *Heart of Darkness*, Sun Tzu (a male cliché, as she understands), a Family Bible the size of a small suitcase, and poetry book after poetry book. Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Maya Angelou. Which means...what, exactly? Beyond his tough military exterior, Hank has a sensitive side? Or were the poetry books left here by Sid? She flips through a selected poets of the 20th century collection but finds nothing of interest.

Eden steps outside. Glass windows on either side of her are tear-stained; the porch retains that post-rain smell. No sign of Hank or Sid. If Sid left his keys in his truck she could probably carry Bobby downstairs and jet out before they knew what was happening. Might not be so forgiving if they caught up with them down the road, however. Best she bide her time, figure things out.

She stands still for a moment, cigarette dangling from her lips, disposable lighter in hand, listening to the morning develop. Chickens cluck and flutter their wings. Mourning doves lament various sorrows. Behind the barn, a hungry goat bleats. The wind, gentle as a sigh of relief, cools her. Country air—a far cry from the stink of Heritage, where the grain elevator and sheet metal factory are always farting something. Almost enough to make her reconsider the cigarette, but she fires it up regardless, cool smoke roiling in her lungs. Finally.

Side by side ruts carve a path from cornfield to barn, where the door hangs open and a tractor's nose pokes out. The tractor's headlamps have been removed, eyeless sockets. Wires trail down to the ground. Eden frowns at the mutilated tractor, wondering what Rooster will do should he find them. He'd butcher Eden just as soon as he'd blink. Maybe Bobby too. Only through police incompetence, ambivalence, or worst of all, assistance, does Rooster remain a free man. Eden figures he's broken about every Iowa law and regulation three times over.

Inside the barn, a chain rattles. The tractor's nose disappears. Voices holler, an angry commotion. She pulls a long drag and walks barefoot around the tree out front for a better angle into the barn.

Sid and Hank, their arms flailing about, stand arguing in front of a car with a classic-looking grill and a yawning jaw. Sid's face grows red as Hank slams the hood down. The car, sky-blue, looks to be vintage, probably 50s or 60s—long and squarish but with curved, aerodynamic corners. The way Sid yanks the hood back up and crosses his arms and plants his feet in front of the car makes Eden think it belongs to him and not

Hank. There's a sense of ownership in his stance. Zeke also liked classic cars, and over the years he even owned one or two, but he let them go all to hell, never bothering to rotate the tires or change the oil at regular intervals.

Eden ashes her cigarette with a coin-toss gesture, which catches Sid's attention. He frowns at her and pulls the barn doors shut.

She takes another drag. Men. They're always hiding something.

CHAPTER 10

“What you see is what you get. We got the standards, of course, apple and cherry and peach. Then I made rhubarb, bumbleberry, chocolate, lemon meringue. Coconut cream, you know, for hoity-toity visitors from Des Moines and Council Bluffs. Key lime and wild huckleberry. Banana cream and shoofly, sure enough. Blueberry, blackberry, boysenberry—”

“Wait. Goldie, did you say shoofly?”

“Yes, shoofly pie.”

Rooster rubs his whiskers and scans the five-tiered glass display where a sign reads DOLLAR PIE SLICE DAY. It never ceases to amaze him how many pie varieties Goldschmidt concocts and produces every Sunday. Churchgoers fill the café—there’s nary a seat available even at the counter—and white-shirted, red-aproned waiters and waitresses scurry about the honeycomb-tile floor. Moiré wallpaper coats the walls, wrinkling and bubbling as it nears the kitchen. Rectangular casement windows wear fingerprint smudges and a large sign with the café’s name in Old English font. The G in Goldschmidt’s Café looks more like an ampersand to Rooster, who has a corner booth reserved for pie day.

He came in and played it coy, commenting on the weather and the packed booths and where’s that one really good waitress, whatsername, Eden? Goldie, pie artisan and café owner, said Eden no called/no showed this morning. She requested weekends off—childcare is more expensive on Saturday and Sunday—so maybe she didn’t realize he put her on the schedule. Had to: short-staffed. Might not even write her up ’cause she’s never

even been so much as five minutes late before. Welcome to wait, he told Rooster, see if she might pop in.

Sure. But the shoofly.

“It’s a molasses pie,” explains Goldschmidt. He’s fiftyish, a nervous, emaciated family man with a combover. Works so much his fingers are skeletal. Three generations of Goldschmidts have owned and operated the family-style restaurant in Heritage, although without a son (he has four adult daughters, two of whom Rooster’s known in the Biblical sense), Thomas Goldschmidt IV is skeptical about the café’s future. Sure, people stay for the pie, he often tells Rooster, but they come for the name and reputation.

“Molasses?”

“That’s how it gets its name, see; it attracts flies. Shoofly. You know the saying, right?”

“You catch more flies with honey than vinegar,” says Rooster.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Goldie, I got a question. Litmus test sorta thing. If I ran for mayor, I’d have your support, right?”

A poof and burst of flame escapes the saloon-style kitchen doors, followed by confused shouts and clattering pots and pans.

“Scheisse!” Goldschmidt beelines to the kitchen.

Rooster sips his coffee. He wears a yellow polo shirt and khakis with frayed cuffs, Sunday outfit—he isn’t a church-goer but enjoys dressing up a little. He’s thinking about ordering but the waitress, an older woman with gray-streaked, curly-haired bangs secured

to one side with a dragonfly barrette, skips right on by his corner booth. Nice round hips. Doesn't seem familiar; must be new in town. Rooster wonders what her story is, where she's from. Iowa's full of people once advancing west. Been that way ever since frontier days and now here they are, a whole crop of people stuck in the middle of the country. Waylaid in the Heartland. Rooster's business thrives on that kind of desperation.

Goldschmidt, shaking his head, rushes over to Rooster's table. "Summer help nearly ruined the mush. Remember when the movie theater almost burned down? Selbst ist der Mann..."

The bell over the front door jing-a-lings and in walks a county deputy. Another unfamiliar face. Rooster frowns. The uniformed man's bald scalp glistens with sweat. He puts his hands on his hips and taps his holstered pistol, perusing the pie display.

"John Pepper," says Goldschmidt, leaning over the table and speaking in a hushed tone. "He grew up here, but his family moved to Urbandale. Rumor is he spent some time in Alaska. Three years. Not sure what he's doing back in town."

Rooster takes in the new cop: Pepper's got that buttoned-up look, uniform neat and pressed, heavily starched collar hanging crisp below his neck. His black boots are as polished as trophies. His olive green Dockers, the exact color of his necktie, are creased from thigh to ankle. A pig-tailed cord runs from shoulder mic to waist radio, and on the other side of his belt is a holstered Heckler and Koch .45. Rooster knows the pistol; cops prefer the HK45 for its reliability and minimal recoil.

“Gotta earn a living,” says Goldschmidt, who speeds back to the kitchen. Always rushing around. Man needs to relax. Rooster waves Pepper over, offering him a seat at his corner booth.

“Deputy Pepper. What can I do for you?”

“Friends call me Rooster. Have a seat.”

They shake hands, a firm grip. Too firm on Pepper’s end; he’s overcompensating for something. Could be a bad sign, like he’s heard negative comments about Rooster and wants to prove he’s in charge. A newcomer out to make a name for himself. At least one Heritage cop has it in for Rooster, though he’s unsure who it might be.

“Much obliged,” says Pepper, gesturing toward the max capacity crowd. The deputy’s posture is immaculate, spine perfectly aligned. He folds his hands, fingers interlaced, on the table while maintaining eye contact. Rooster waits for him to speak.

“Nice necklace. That like a rabbit’s paw? Bring you any luck?”

Rooster smiles but doesn’t answer. “Starting or ending a shift?”

“Got an hour to kill, so I stopped in for pie day.”

“I hear shoofly is the way to go.”

“Too sweet. Gimme a cavity just thinking about it.”

“Oh yeah,” says Rooster. Shiny white teeth. Bald head. Dudley Do-Right chin. He remembers everything now. “You played football, didn’t you? Called you Johnny back then. You were good. When’d you graduate, like eight years ago?”

“Seven,” mumbles Pepper, embarrassed by his youth.

“Huh. I stopped going to the games after a while, but I think I remember you. Running back?”

Pepper nods. He licks his lips and lowers his voice, leaning across the table. Something more on his mind than glory days. “I made a few...bad investments at the casino. Been needing some extra cash and heard you can help. I hear right?”

“I have no idea,” says Rooster, “what you’re talking about.”

“Come on. I hear the chatter. You pay good money for good work—that’s all I’m interested in. Who else you employ on the force? Guarantee they skim off you. Cops are the worst skimmers.”

The four HC deputies directly under Rooster’s employ—the Larsen brothers, their cousin Brandon, and a part-timer named Ira Nebel—all look the part: neckbeards, tattoos, piercings, sunken eyes. As such they have limited utility. No one at the station trusts them all that much, though no concrete evidence has surfaced that they’re taking bribes. They don’t get much respect from Heritage citizens, either. Might be nice, Rooster muses, to have a boy scout like Pepper on his side. Especially if something like back in February happens again.

Division of Narcotics Enforcement agents, summoned by an anonymous tip, came sniffing around Rooster’s junkyard on Valentine’s Day. One of the Larsen brothers, having overheard locker room talk about the bust, phoned Rooster and warned him that DNE was on their way. Never did determine the source of the anonymous tip. Rooster quickly ditched the incriminating aspects of his operation—it helped that everything was entirely mobile. Zeke, Amos, and Ira Nebel drove the vehicles off-site. The stashes found

nothing on Rooster's property. They advised local law enforcement to stop harassing Rooster lest he sue. In other words: thanks for the call, but no thanks at all.

Still, Rooster doesn't like the proposition. Something about Pepper's eagerness makes him wary.

Goldschmidt walks over with an extra slice of pie and a steaming cup of coffee on a saucer. The cup rattles as he sets it down, a ring of dark liquid circling the saucer's depression. He sets the pie in front of the coffee.

"Hope that's not shoofly," says Rooster.

With a confused look on his face, Goldschmidt says, "Rhubarb."

"My mom grew her own rhubarb," says Pepper, leaning forward to inspect the slice. "She made homemade crisp mostly. Something about that tart flavor that just goes with brown sugar—it offsets and whatnot. Never made pie, but I'm sure the idea's the same."

Goldschmidt glows with pride as he returns to the kitchen. A young girl at the table next to them spills her glass of chocolate milk, a brown puddle forming on the floor. The older waitress—the one who ignored Rooster earlier—tosses a towel over the milk with such quickness and precision it's like she's putting out a fire. The girl cries, inconsolable even with both parents assuring her that a refill is on its way.

Rooster's coffee has gone lukewarm. He considers dumping it on the floor—might be the fastest way to get it refreshed. "Got any kids, Pepper?"

"Summer kids. Some are here, some are there." He laughs at his own joke. "Nah, I ain't got no rugrats. Not now, not ever."

“I may have a kid out there, looks like.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“Used an unreliable method of birth control,” says Rooster. “The pull and pray.”

“No offense, but you don’t seem like the praying type.”

“Like I said. Unreliable.” Rooster spins the laminated menu around. The same menu from when he came to Goldschmidt’s as a child. “Don’t think I’d want kids. Too much trouble, too much work. They’re always making dumb decisions and expecting to get bailed out. Few years back a kid got eaten by a mountain lion near Woodburn.

Probably thought he was a big kitten, huh?”

Pepper rolls his eyes. “I heard that same story...no mountain lions around here.”

“Sure there are. They’re all over; you just have to know how to bring them to you. I’ve done the research. Some people recommend a live baby goat—their bleats are like catnip to a cougar. I’ve heard skunk, too, although good luck nabbing one without getting sprayed. But you know what I’m going to try?”

Pepper shrugs.

“Pig guts.”

“Hey. I’m eating over here.”

“Yeah, pig guts. You soak the gut sac in a bucket of antifreeze for twenty-four hours. Car antifreeze, that ethylene glycol. The good stuff. Potent. Trapper’s call it green Kool-Aid. Mountain lion comes around, starts eating that sweet treat—only the aftertaste is bitter, see—and before he can stop himself, crystals begin forming in his kidneys.

Liver shuts down, the brain dies. Called glyoxylate poisoning.”

Pepper, color drained from his nearly hairless face, shoves his pie plate away.

“I’m joking, of course,” says Rooster, smiling wide and gathering in the plate of pie. He breaks off some crust. “I would never poison an animal. That goes against all my trapping ethics.”

Waiters and waitresses chicken-scratch in their mini notepads. Ice settles in glasses. Silverware clatters on plates. The young girl gets more chocolate milk, this time in a to-go cup with a lid and straw. She bubbles the milk and laughs, tears still glistening in her eyes. Outside, the sun has risen above the other buildings, projecting a silhouette of the café sign’s lettering on the floor. Rooster uses his hands to eat another bite of pie.

“What is that—brown sugar baked right into the crust?”

“That’d be my guess,” says Pepper.

Rooster’s glad he doesn’t have what he considers an addictive personality. Sure, there’s the meth, but he’ll go weeks at a time without using, just to prove to himself that he can. That and his nostrils need a break. The only things he snorts during those periods is warm water, soothing his nasal passages. He never, ever smokes the drug. Mayoral candidates can’t have messed up teeth.

A long sigh from Pepper. “So you need help or what?”

“Not so fast, hotshot. Gotta go through the vetting process.” He’s eager, but there could be a good reason for that. Maybe financial. Rooster can get Wendy to run a background check tomorrow—nice having a girlfriend who works at the bank. “You be near the town square Monday morning, right around say ten-thirty.”

“What am I doing?”

“Just be there,” says Rooster. “You’ll know what to do.” He drains his tepid coffee as he stands up and tucks his rooster’s foot necklace, a good luck charm he’s had since age twelve, back into his polo shirt.

CHAPTER 11

Chickens cluck in the coop. First one, then others join in like a chorus. All outside noises make their way inside; the barn provides wind cover and not much else. The lumber used for the siding is warped and full of knots. Sunlight pinpricks the decaying roof. Dust motes like sheet music stir in the air.

“Egg-laying hour,” says Sid, trying to make a joke.

Hank’s not having it. Tight-lipped. Stone-faced. The two men square off under the scruffy hayloft, crowded by Hank’s tractor, the Subaru he promised Eden and Bobby, various machinery parts, a few vacant cattle stalls, and a four-door hardtop 1966 Chrysler Imperial. Big, hulking, vintage sedan. A mechanic’s creeper sits under the front end.

“I don’t even know why I bother, flyboy. Let’s fix the wagon. If those two are on the run, someone’s looking for them. And *someone* is exactly who I don’t want sniffing around here.”

“I know, I know,” says Sid. “Florida.”

Hank grinds his teeth so hard they squeak. “You told her about Florida?”

“Of course not. I’m not stupid.”

“You brought them here,” Hank points out.

“Thought you were in the helping-people business.”

“Yes. I am. I’m making amends for not speaking out.”

“What’s the timeframe on that, Chappie?”

“Timeframe? After I get done holding your hand with the Chrysler, I’ll get right on it. We can make our amends together.”

“Listen to you. *Amends.*” Sid leans up against the Chrysler Imperial. “I put that war shit in the rear-view mirror a long time ago. We did what we were told, end of story.”

“So you don’t feel guilty?”

“Gimme a break—I turned wrenches.”

“That aircraft you worked on, after they were all loaded for bear and whatnot...where do you think they went?”

“The wild blue yonder.”

Hank’s eyes glaze over. It’s an old argument. Sid enlisted because his dad had recently passed away, heart failure, and the world suddenly needed to be a whole lot bigger than Iowa Falls. Besides, all his classmates were joining up. They had their uniformed pictures in the local paper under a HOMETOWN HERO banner, returning from basic training and AIT or SOI with a newfound confidence—sheepish students with bad posture that once sat behind Sid in class, now with buzzed heads and muscular physiques. All that, and a free ticket out of Iowa Falls. Sid wanted to be in a plane—even logged in fifty hours on a PC flight sim at the local library—and joined the Air Force, where they made him an aircraft mechanic. No aerial gunner, not even loadmaster. Grounded.

Hank, on the other hand, had a father drafted into Vietnam. Three tours and his old man came back to protest, cradling baby Hank in one arm, waving a STOP THE WAR sign with the other. But Hank thought he could do greater good from the inside. Save souls, even. He started out in the Army, then went green to blue. Became an Air

Force chaplain. Sid often suspects that's why the old man gets all torn up about war: loading so many flag-draped coffins into the rear end of so many C-130s... It's natural to assume everyone else is like you: either racked with guilt or in denial.

"Maybe think things through once in a while," says Hank, and he moves over to the barn door, peeks through a crack, and shakes his head slowly. "Just wanted a few peaceful years out here... She's trouble. Small town, large hell."

"Probably running out on her old man," says Sid. "Doesn't want a custody battle. Sold me some story about how he'd been shot."

"The hell? So the cops are *definitely* looking for her! Did she shoot him? He still alive?"

Sid frowns. He can't see her pulling the trigger—doesn't seem the murderous type. But then he hasn't known her long. "I dunno. Don't think so. I believe about every third word out of her mouth, okay? She's been working me since we met in the bar."

"I thought you picked them up off the side of the road."

"Well..."

Hank growls something indeterminate. He tinkers around the Imperial's open mouth. Sid reaches in and pulls a rag and a bottle of WD-40 from a nook in the engine compartment.

"Imperial looks good," he tells Hank, using his boot to skateboard the mechanic's creeper out from under the car. "Think we'll finish her this winter?"

"If you don't strip out any bolts or crack any filters, sure."

The Chrysler Imperial came with a 440 cubic-inch engine, a V8 Wedgehead that put that beast to *work*. Three-speed automatic transmission. Idled like an angry wasp. Not the fastest, just the toughest. After they cherry-picked the sooty remnant of an engine out, they could have just ordered stock. But Hank said it wasn't enough. He isn't okay with standard issue anything, at least not when it comes to vehicles. He hunted down the engine's TNT version, complete with dual exhaust out the back end. Parts are hard to locate, but they're making do.

“So?” says Hank, grabbing the rag and oil can from Sid. “Rounding the six-year mark. You ready to move on?”

“Still more towns out there. Got run out of Heritage before I had time to look for him.”

“Always *him*. Could've just been a nice old granny behind the wheel, you know.”

“In that mullet mobile? Not a chance.”

Hank pshaws. He's made it known, more than a few times over the years, that he thinks Sid's manhunt a time-wasting crusade. Hank, that stubborn old fart, refuses to work on the car unless Sid's there. The process of rebuilding and restoring, Hank insists, doesn't happen over a twenty minute break in between derby heats. But Sid's only interested in crashing the Imperial again, except this time he'll be doing the hitting, coup de tête, a hundred-mile-an-hour headbutt right into that Trans Am. See what happens *then*.

“Let's work on the Chrysler first,” says Hank. “Can't believe I have to hold your hand.”

“I get by okay,” says Sid, slinging his jacket over a nail in the barn’s center post. But truthfully he knows he was never cut out for intense or methodical maintenance work. As an aircraft mechanic he had to follow work cards and tech data step by step. Names of tools constantly eluded him. Airmen fresh from tech school surpassed his knowledge set.

Hank, on the other hand, moves around an engine the way a classical pianist folds back the fallboard and glides her fingers across ivory-capped keys. Even before commencing, Hank’s self-assuredness conveys a level of professionalism Sid lacks. But that’s why Sid prefers derby cars—you only need to hold things together until the end.

CHAPTER 12

Including everything from fender benders to multi-vehicle pileups on the interstate, there are about ten million automobile accidents in America each year. Every day, a hundred or so people die on U.S. roadways. Many factors contribute to these statistics, with the most common being distraction, weather, and other drivers. Six years ago on I-35, Sid hit the trifecta.

The denim blue sky they left in Iowa Falls had turned to old dishwater. Foamy clouds and a veil of rain southward, advancing like cavalry. That familiar musty smell came through the vents. The rain, their car, destined to meet. Sid pointed out mile marker 61 as if to say, look: almost there.

“We should turn back,” said Jess.

Sid lowered his head for a better angle. “Just a little shower.” Light traffic for I-35. Sure, the Chrysler’s tires were bald, but it was a big, hulking, vintage sedan plowing forward at fifteen miles per gallon, highway. Real tank of a car, he told his wife, three tons. No way it spins out.

“No way,” said their daughter in the back seat. Tabitha, Tabby for short. She was in that repeat-everything stage. “No way, Mom.”

“Should’ve taken the truck,” said Jess.

“Remember? This is supposed to be special.” A stab of something like pain even as he said the words. That they needed something special, different—that was the problem.

Rain stampeded across the steel roof and drowned out the radio, which Jess shut off with a theatrical flick of her hand. The knob clucked. She leaned back, feet on the dash. Gray fog on the windshield outlined her footprints.

Off and full blast were the only two wiper blade settings that worked. They chopped back and forth like hummingbird wings. In the trunk: cooler filled with meatloaf sandwiches, potato chips, squeaky-fresh cheese curds, apples, and bottled water; checkered picnic blanket; yoga mat. No umbrella.

“Might not be raining there,” offered Sid.

“We’re driving right into the heart of things.”

“Well,” he said, and understood that she was upset, even though she struck a similar cockeyed pose at ease, coming home from the River Tap or Five O Three after their three drink limit. Her piña coladas or mai tais, “fun drinks,” him sticking to beer. They hadn’t stepped foot in a bar in a good long while, at least not together.

“Put your seatbelt on,” said Jess.

“It’s too tight. Won’t adjust.”

“What a mess. How much would someone pay for this car?”

“I don’t know. Few grand.”

“I’m running an ad in the *Register* tomorrow. For sale, few grand.”

“Few gran,” parroted Tabby, shuffling around her booster seat.

Sid felt like a raincloud blocking sunshine from his family. All they needed to be happy was for him to break apart, drift away. The trip, he had decided, was his Hail Mary pass, a last second heave before he visited that divorce attorney he found online.

A shadow moved in behind them. Partially obscured by rainfall until it was riding the Chrysler's bumper.

"Slow *down*," said Jess, sleepy-eyed. Her feet still on the dash.

*

Speaking with investigators in the hospital, Sid remembered the car growing in his rear-view mirror. He sensed it, the way you cringe before smelling old milk. Inevitable. Or was that the clarity of hindsight? Rain added a glow to the dark car. Gold firebird tattooed on the hood. The silhouette of a man behind the wheel. Then the shove, a feeling of uncontrol he hadn't experienced since the war. A second later they were sailing over the grassy median, colliding with an overpass bridge's rebar-threaded pillar. His mind a tornado of panic as he woke up, thrown free from the car. Glass and gravel embedded in his arm. Jess and Tabby still inside the burning wreck, the Chrysler uncerueil. And then nothing more until he woke up again in the hospital. The investigators exchanged skeptical looks with each other, saying they'd see what they can do, but they had no license plate, no other eyewitnesses, and the tread marks were iffy at best due to the rain and all the other cars traveling down I-35. Sid nodded along with a vacant stare, thinking about what he might do to the man in the Trans Am who sped away, who did not brake or call for help. Take him apart, piece by piece.

CHAPTER 13

Sid removes the Imperial's open element air filter, thinking that it's late, probably getting on toward noon. Difficult to determine because time passes in weird chunks out here in the country: twenty minutes moves like a garden slug, but half a day can blink right by you. He leans up against the Imperial's hood, signaling Hank that he's ready for a break.

Both men wear sleeves of grease. Hank says they'll take five so he can feed the animals, gather eggs. There's a goat pen beside the chicken coop, and in a pasture nearby, Hank's been raising a stray Holstein calf. Heifer now, really; she's taller than the backyard LP tank. Hank claims she wandered onto his property sans brand or tag, but there was a round hole punched through her left ear that has since healed over, lumpy cartilage beneath her skin feelable to this day. Still, no one ever came searching for her, fair game as far as Hank's concerned.

"When you tighten them camshaft bolts," adds Hank, walking out the door, "make sure you don't tear the gasket."

Sid three-points the air filter into a metal trash can. It rattles home. They'll put the twin snorkels on later. No rush. As he hunts for the last camshaft bolt, tiny footsteps shuffle outside. Bobby pokes his head in, wiping sleepy dirt from his eyes.

"Whatcha doing?"

Sid lies prone, scouring the ground for his missing bolt. Sweat stings his eyes but with grease-covered hands and arms he can't find relief. Bobby's untied sneakers scrape a path to the Imperial.

“Is this your car?”

The salt sting can't be blinked away. Sid squints at Bobby. “You know how to tie your shoes, kid?”

“Yes,” says Bobby, and as he leans over he whispers, “Loop, swoop, pull.”

“Why don't you see if Hank needs any help? He's grabbing eggs from the chicken coop.”

“No thanks,” he says. His overbite makes him sound eager. “I don't like eggs.”

“Of course you don't.” Sid runs greasy hands through his hair. Ran out of those blue latex gloves last spring and hasn't had time to fetch more. He lifts his shirttail and dabs at his salty eyes.

“What happened to your arm?”

Sid's scars are like surfaced tree roots snaking across a grassy lawn. Thick, menacing, brachial roots. Waiting to trip someone.

“Geez, kid, you ask a lot of questions. You and your mom both. I fell down some stairs, okay?”

“Did it hurt?”

“You should see the stairs.”

The bolt's nowhere to be found. Sid finger-snugs the remaining bolts, then figures he better give them a twist so more don't wander off. Since Bobby's near the toolbox, Sid asks him for a crescent wrench.

“The nine-sixteenths,” he specifies.

Bobby tiptoes up for a better look. Tools shuffle.

“Today, kid.”

Bobby hands him a multi-tip screwdriver, the kind with clips inside its hollow grip for the extra heads, and smiles. Sid looks him over. Acorn face, hair like a broom’s bristles except for his wispy eyebrows. Overbite displayed prominently with a self-satisfied grin. Tabitha had an overbite too—Sid and Jess talked about when she’d get braces. Everything the same, everything different. Sid blinks. Once. Twice. The world, or at least his vision of it, trembles. Feels feverish, the shakes. He flings the screwdriver across the barn, where it slams against the wall and clatters on the ground.

“You don’t know what a crescent wrench is, dumbass?”

Bobby winces. His eyes are wide, locked onto Sid’s arm scars. “You said a bad word.”

Sid finds a rag in a crevice of the Imperial’s engine. The rag changes from maroon to jet black as he twists it over his thumb. He stops when he gets to his second most ulnar finger, but then remembers he doesn’t wear the ring anymore, hasn’t for a few years now. He pulls on his jacket, concealing the ugly scars.

“Sorry,” he mumbles to Bobby. “I’m looking for a bolt. You wanna help? It’s about yea big.” He holds out his thumb to indicate the size.

Bobby, misunderstanding Sid’s gesture, presents a boisterous thumbs-up. His thumb curls back after the knuckle, bending like a scimitar. Sid remembers how the Iraq Campaign Medal featured a pair of those curved-blade swords. Arab daggers, some troops called them.

“Hey,” says Sid. “You’ve got a hitchhiker’s thumb.”

The boy cocks his head and retracts his gesture. “What?”

“Hitchhiker’s thumb. Where your thumb curls back at the top. See, look at mine.”

He demonstrates with a perfectly erect thumbs-up; Bobby compares and contrasts, a slideshow of expressions on his face: confused, doubtful, pleased.

“Means you’re a good traveler. You’ll see the world on that thumb someday, kid.”

He hopes it’s a better place by then. Seems unlikely.

Bobby inspects both thumbs. “Does my mom have fish hiker’s thumb?”

“Hitchhiker’s. I dunno, kid.” Genetic, but a recessive trait not always exhibited by both parents. Sid keeps this thought to himself. It washes over him anew: the kid’s fatherless. Does he even know?

They search around the mid-surgery Chrysler Imperial but only turn up three socket caps and a cotter pin. They move on to other parts of the barn. Bobby goes from stall to stall, kicking around hay and testing the integrity of various nailed-in two-by-fours. Hinges creak as he yanks stall doors open. Bobby reaches the final stall and, pulling the wooden door open, scans the area inside. He emits a shriek, half excitement and half fear, reminding Sid of voices on the derby track.

He runs to Bobby and says, “What?”

Bobby tomahawks a hand toward the far corner, near a stack of slip-on pipe flanges. A plump mama mouse. She’s the size of a rolled-up sock, with five pinkies locked into her teats, sucking and holding on for dear life. The mom crinkles her snout, whiskers tensing. Her long tail shivers. She’s looking away from them, off to the side, but Sid figures mice have good peripheral vision, their beady black eyes on the sides of their

head and whatnot. Her rounded ears perk as Bobby leans on the stall door. She skitters into the next stall, squeezing herself and her attached brood through a crack.

Miraculously she doesn't lose any pinkies.

Sid and Bobby stand there, just outside the far end cattle stall, first staring at the hole through which the mice escaped and then facing each other. They laugh. A little giggle at first, then chuckles, and then full body laughter, a dormant sensation for Sid.

“Bobby!”

“That's my mom,” says Bobby, and he, like the mama mouse, amscrays. Eden, from the front porch, lectures her son on the dangers of going off alone.

Meanwhile, Hank returns with a basket of brown eggs. He pulls the missing camshaft bolt from his back pocket. “Put this in already,” he says, tossing the bolt toward Sid, who catches it midair. “Let's get some breakfast.”

Late morning transitions from warm to hot to miserable. Humid enough to boil a dozen ears of corn. Out in the wild blue, another hawk screeches, except this time it sounds joyful, like laughter. Sid chews his bottom lip as he inserts the last bolt. He took his wedding ring off in a truck stop bathroom and when he came back it was gone. The gas jockey, a tall guy with mutton chops and hair to his shoulders, hazy eyes, said sorry, no one's turned anything in. Them's the breaks. Maybe your old lady will forgive you for losing your wedding ring. After all, man, it's jewelry. Right here (and he tapped his heart) s'what counts. Like the good book says, love covereth all sins.

For a gas jockey, the guy sure knew his Proverbs.

CHAPTER 14

In this fertile land where Grain Belt and Bible Belt overlap, Rooster isn't surprised that no one's in sight. Matter of fact, he planned on most farmers being in church. Come harvest time, a faithful few even drive their combines from field to Sunday service. No sooner does the preacher say "Go in grace" and they're back at it again.

From the road, the pasture curves downward after a hundred paces, hiding whatever lurks beyond. All you can see are the tops of a few trees, their leaves swishing in the wind. Rooster backs the trailer up to the fence line while Amos spots him.

"I've searched Piper Auto Body and the garages in Creston and Dogwood," says Amos as Rooster hops out the truck. His fat face is flooded with sweat. Flustered. "If that driver stopped by, I'da heard about it."

"Good," says Rooster. "Pick up the search later. I need your muscle for this." He pauses. "Gonna be in there overnight, so you'll have to clean the trailer as well."

Amos nods and spreads the legs of his cable cutters. The tool has a dipped grip for better leverage. Takes care of the four strands of barbwire no problem, the fence twanging each time. Grunting, Amos slips the cable cutters into his back pocket.

Together they angle the heavy ramp so that one end reaches the trailer's mouth, the other resting just inside the fence opening. Crispy grass here; June's paltry rain hasn't made it this way, about four or five miles south of Heritage. Probably a creek at the bottom of the hill, figures Rooster, and that gets them by.

"What do we use to lure him in?" asks Amos.

"A red cape's most traditional."

“I don’t follow.”

“You could’ve been a matador,” says Rooster, and he grabs a towel-sized rag from the back of his truck. Blue, but he’s always heard it’s about movement, not color.

“What with your speed from all that football practice and your God-given size.”

“A bullfighter?”

Rooster nods, tosses Amos the towel.

“Yeah, imagine I’d like that okay.”

“You don’t have to imagine,” says Rooster, and they enter the pasture. “There he is under that shade tree.”

“Huh,” says Amos. “Big fella.”

CHAPTER 15

Sid's ready to eat a houseful of food.

“So help out,” says Hank. “Everyone does their part.”

They cook pancakes, potatoes diced and fried in butter, and omelets with tomatoes, green peppers, and onions. Hank muscles loose the lid of a jar brimming with canned apples, the seal breaking with a hollow pop. Inside, the already-peeled apples are sweet and soft enough to melt in your mouth. Hank brews coffee and excavates a glass container of milk from the depths of the fridge. He sniffs the contents and shrugs. On the fridge, alligator magnets hold in place Florida-themed postcards: white sandy beaches, sweaty oranges ready to burst apart woven baskets, an airboat cutting through the Everglades.

Hank straightens a magnet. “These are ambersweets—cold-hardy. Make great juice.”

“Get about half a cup per orange,” says Sid, pulp oozing over his knuckles, citric acid stinging fresh cuts and nicks. “You need a juicer.”

Bobby scoops out canned apples and plops them in a bowl while Eden cooks the omelets. The mood's lightened, which Sid attributes to meal-time proximity. That and group collaboration—Hank, still a chaplain at heart, loves teamwork. There's nothing more satisfying for a natural born leader like him than people working together toward a common goal. Could be building a FOB chapel or assisting Sid with the Imperial or a late breakfast. No difference.

“Beats those waffles they served us in the desert,” says Hank. “I’d rather eat a stack of MREs than another chow hall waffle.”

“What’s an MRE?” asks Bobby.

“Meal, Rejected-by-the-Enemy.”

An old joke but it makes Sid smile. He puts his weight into another halved orange, his fingers already sticky with juice. “It’s Meal, Ready-to-Eat, Bobby. Hank’s got a tub full in the basement—maybe he’ll send you off with a couple for the trip. In the service they call MREs a real dealmaker. Three lies for the price of one: not a meal, not ready, and you sure as shit can’t eat it.”

Bobby laughs, slapping his palm against the table so hard the legs wobble like a newborn calf. Eden shakes her head at Sid, who shrugs. Like the kid hasn’t heard a few swear words in his life. His dad got blown away and she’s worried about cussing?

“Omelets are the worst MRE,” explains Hank. He pops an apple slice into his mouth. “Look like dog vomit and don’t taste much better. I was always a fan of the veggie burger, surprisingly enough, though it wasn’t much bigger than a fifty-cent piece.”

Eden runs the fork’s prongs against the bottom of the cast iron pan. The burner crackles, yellow teardrop flames scorching the pan. Sid chuckles. He’s plenty familiar with Hank’s gas oven range, which has two settings: off and blazing. Eden pries off some hardened egg bits and flicks them into the sink.

“You two were in the service together?” she asks. “Is that how you know each other?”

Sid shuffles his feet on the wood floor. Better to let Hank answer. A grandfather clock down the hallway chimes. Eden turns down the burner, but when the flames don't lower, she clicks it off.

"We were, for a time," says Hank, eyeing Sid. "Just a couple Air Force mechanics, stationed in Missouri, supporting A-10's and B-2's at Whiteman AFB. Then Sid got out and I retired. Twenty-five years of service, figured it was high time to try something else."

"Like farming," Eden says slowly.

"Let's eat," says Hank.

A triple-bladed fan creaks wearily above the kitchen table. Hank asks can they say grace and no one objects, so he spreads out his arms toward Bobby and Eden. Sid, sitting at the other end of the table, takes Bobby's hand and then Eden's. Her fingers are warm and lithe and he misses Hank's blessing, from Our Heavenly Father all the way to Amen, because he thinks he feels Eden's grip tightening. Hard to say for sure. As a child he always wanted the callous hands of his father, but now he wonders if that means you feel less.

"Amen," echoes Bobby, and he spears a pancake, bringing the whole thing to his mouth. When he sets down his fork the pancake looks like Pac-man.

"Small bites, Bobby," scolds Eden.

The food's good. Sid's diet on the derby circuit consists of food marginally more appealing than an MRE. Depending on where he is there might be regional treats: Muscatine melons; Dutch letters in Pella; and near the Iowa Speedway in Newton, cheese

from Maytag Dairy Farms. Those culinary delights, however, are few and far between. Usually it's county fair hot dogs, stale café sandwiches, gas station pizza.

As they eat Hank explains that Eden is welcome to the Subaru, which should be ready before nightfall, tomorrow at latest. All she owes him, he says, is a postcard.

"Might be nice to see some mountains for a change."

"How'd you settle in Iowa?" asks Eden.

"Long story. I guess you could say I enjoy the isolation," says Hank. "But that's part of the problem...don't have any gasoline handy. Mostly use diesel around here." He sips his coffee. "Sid's a diesel man as well. I converted him."

"Better torque," says Sid.

"No use syphoning then. You'll run into town and pick up a can, won't you, Sid? Don't wanna strand these two on the highway."

Sid clears his throat, nods.

Hank scoots his chair back and arises. He shucks his plate into the kitchen sink. High noon throws sharp-edged shadows on the counter. The sink handle yelps. Clear liquid soap, two squirts. Suds accumulate.

Eden asks if she can use the phone to call her sister. Hank dries off his hands and slings the dish towel over his shoulder bartender-style and leads Eden down the hall. The phone's a rotary dial, mounted on the wall. You can only go so far as the cord allows, which is the way Hank prefers it. Sid knows for a fact the only calls the old man gets anymore are from telemarketers via a random number generator and biannual calls from his two kids. They ring him up the way most people attend church: Christmas and Easter.

“Do you have a dog?” asks Bobby.

“No dog, just cats,” says Hank. “Farm cats. They come and go, sneak in when you ain’t looking. If you get them to stay and catch some barn mice, I’d be forever in your debt.”

Eden rushes in and tugs on Sid’s shirtsleeve, urging him outside. That same look from the bar last night on her face, pure animal fear.

“Back in a sec,” Sid tells Hank and Bobby.

The sun’s high and hot, mercury hovering around 95 with low-hanging, submarine-shaped clouds doing nothing in the way of cover. They find shade under the front yard’s lone oak.

“Someone called my sister this morning,” she says, wrapping her arms around her torso like a one-way hug. Her teeth chatter, a cacophonous sound heard over unseen birds warbling in the branches above them. “They asked if she’d seen me or if she knew where I was.”

“The cops?”

Eden grows pale, white as the distant clouds. She shakes her head and says one word: “Rooster.”

When they first met Sid found her unfeeling—she didn’t seem bothered that her husband, estranged though they were, had been gunned down. But trauma affects people differently. At first Sid told himself he was riding the demolition derby circuit just to search for the Trans Am, but he soon discovered he needed the crashing. He was in love

with it, as messed up as that sounded, and though the psychology was at best paradoxical, he refused to pause long enough to question the relief each derby brought.

“He was in my house and he found her number. He *threatened* her.”

“Tell me about this guy, this Rooster. What’s he look like?”

After regaining her composure, Eden describes the man who shot her husband. Rooster’s young, late twenties she thinks, but has gray-tinged curly hair, neatly trimmed. Eden uses hands in the air to map out his appearance, grimacing the whole time. She says his dark eyes are sunk deep into their sockets and they roll upward when he rubs his five o’ clock shadow. He’s tall and thin and good-looking, a regular ladies man, prematurely-aged hair somehow only making him more alluring. And the drugs. Rumor has it he stayed awake for a month at a time, then slept for two full weeks. People tried nicknaming him Rip Van Winkle but it never stuck. He already had a nickname. Rooster.

“What’s his real name?”

She mulls this over. “I guess I don’t know. He was quiet in high school—I don’t really even remember him. You think he knows we hitched a ride with you?”

“Doesn’t matter—this place, it isn’t listed in the phone book. Can’t even find it online.” When he rests a hand on her shoulder she trembles, giving slightly under his touch.

“Can we stay here tonight?”

They’ve already overstayed their welcome as far as Sid’s concerned. But what can he say? He figures Rooster will kill her and Bobby if he finds them. Wants them pretty

bad if he tracked down her sister three states west. Might have something in mind for Sid. Hank, too. Might be better if they lie low until things cool off.

Sid frowns. No use wishing he'd left them on the side of the road; they're his problem now. He hates that feeling of being smack dab in the middle of a thing, lined up in the bull's-eye. That's usually when someone pulls the trigger.

CHAPTER 16

“I don’t wanna shoot you,” says Pepper, “but I will.”

The quarter ’til eleven sun is already beating the hell out of the sidewalks. Rooster dabs his forehead with a handkerchief as a crowd accumulates. Most of the businesses around the town square flipped their signs around and locked up for an early Monday lunch once the commotion began. No one wanted to be left out. They gathered under the shoe store, each spectator jockeying for shade under the awning. Next to Amos, Rooster has position of his choosing, since no one would dare elbow or shoulder-check the big man, even inadvertently. He lurks in the back of the crowd, Amos holding a cigarette between his fingers but not lighting it.

Rooster can’t help smirking as Deputy John Pepper, standing in the middle of the street, threatens the bull. A Limousin bull, wheat-colored and well over half a ton, that would be granted, were it in the Heritage County Fair and not the street, the superior label of performance beef over breeding beef or cow-calf. He’s an old bull though, with an unsure stance and milky eyes. Probably half blind. Otherwise he’d’ve charged Pepper by now, the way the deputy’s carrying on. The bull snorts and shimmies and stamps a hoof as Pepper waves his .45 pistol around, the crowd looking on. Someone wonders out loud how the animal got there.

“He came from the alley by the bank,” claims one man.

“Bull,” says another, and his diction draws scattered laughter. Pepper, his bald head as shiny as a waxed apple, continues his matador routine in the street, his squad car and two others behind the ruckus. White Impalas with a single gold stripe down both

sides, POLICE settled above HERITAGE COUNTY. An American flag decal adorns each rear wheel well, but only Pepper's vehicle has a cow catcher bolted on the front bumper, which Rooster thinks quite appropriate given the circumstances. The other cops, Ira Nebel and the Larsen brothers, sit on the hoods of their cars, blocking the sunlight with outstretched palms. They crack jokes, content to let Pepper—the new guy—handle the situation. Trial by fire.

“This is how you get promoted, Pep. Courage in the face of danger. Meritorious conduct if ever I saw it.”

“Whose cow is it? He oughta be fined.”

“Animal neglect?”

“Hell yes. What if someone's car gets rammed? Destruction of private property.”

But by now most non-police cars have been moved; only Hoffman's beater Taurus remains in any danger. Rooster smirks. Old Hoff, that drunk. Must still be locked out.

Rooster and Amos set the bull loose in the back alley that splits Mi Hermano Mexican Restaurant from Heritage Community Bank, where Wendy works as a teller. They pulled the trailer around and left the rig near Jefferson Elementary, then made their way back to the town square just in time to hear a few murmurs, which quickly developed into shouts.

“He's demonstrating suspicious movement,” jokes one fellow officer. “Justifiable shooting, Pep.”

“Shut up,” says Pepper. He's sweating hard, dark ovals on each armpit.

Another officer says, “Better call the meat wagon,” which pleases the crowd greatly, much to Pepper’s chagrin.

“I said shut up!”

Rooster leans against the storefront window, right below a sign that promises blister-free wingtips. He wonders who exactly in Heritage wears wingtips. A few bank tellers, maybe. Real estate agents. Courthouse employees. Salesmen.

All in all there’s around seventy-five people gathered. Even O’Toole, editor of the Heritage Morning Journal, ambles down the street for a look-see. Printing ink smudges his nose. He’s the sort of guy that looks like he has a “kick me” sign permanently taped to his back. He acts annoyed that the cow didn’t venture out before press time; after a few cell phone pics he frowns, evidently displeased. He paces the sidewalk, looking for a better angle.

Pepper chambers a round.

“Uh oh,” an officer says in a nasally voice meant to mock Pepper.

Rooster doubts he’ll actually do it. Someone’ll bring a trailer around eventually. An old, milky-eyed bull, sure, but he’ll be missed. Don’t have to be a livestock farmer to know that. Limousin bulls have been bred since forever to be draft animals, meant for carting around old ag equipment back in the day, a muscular beast with lean but tender meat. Somewhat rare for Iowa, too. Someone’ll make the call, eventually, and it’ll get sorted out.

But it’s a tricky situation today because Heritage currently lacks an authority figure. Last month Sheriff Garcia eloped with Heather Milligan. The mayor, a seventy-

three-year-old who won the lottery and retired at age fifty, is recovering from chemo and staying with his daughter in St. Paul. If he doesn't return by November, an open ballot election will be held and a new mayor crowned. Rooster pauses. If he ran for mayor, what name would he put on yard signs?

The bull licks his chops. The sun shines on. At first Rooster was amused, but now he's thinking about that headless squirrel hide resting in a five-gallon bucket of non-iodized salt in his closet, how it's about ready to work. Should be tough enough, just need to treat the little guy with tanning oil and stuff the body and stitch it together with some brown thread. He yawns.

Other bystanders lose interest as well. Their chatter inevitably steers to the approaching high school football season.

"Should make the playoffs now that Thompson graduated. No more of that dual threat QB nonsense. Colt's a sophomore, but he plays the right way."

"Colt Dvorak? That kid's a real gunslinger. Pitch it the length of the field with a running start. He's slow, though. Slow as molasses. If he raced a pregnant woman he'd come in third."

"Just his arm that needs to be quick. Three step drops'll beat Shenandoah. Seen Colt play JV against them last year. Thirteen for fifteen, pair of tee-dees, and best of all no eye-in-tees."

A loud splashing in the town square park catches everyone's attention. At first Rooster can't figure out what's happening, but when he squints across the street he sees Paul Hoffman emerge from the fountain, completely soaked, water from the moat lapping

out onto the sidewalk. Rooster wonders—how long had he been in there? How did he not drown?

Hoffman tumbles over the railing, car keys clutched in his outstretched hand in a sort of triumphant gesture toward the crowd, as if he thinks they've gathered solely for him. His clothes, soaking wet, hang heavy off his small, booze-addled frame. Still on his knees, he releases a victory cry for the ages, almost like a swan's trumpeting; Rooster didn't think Hoff had that kind of volume inside him. Everyone flinches.

The bull jerks his head toward Hoffman, stamping his hoof again, a judge's gavel, and lowers his head. Snot particles fly out his olive-sized nostrils. Flanks shimmer as the bull coils back and prepares to spring forward.

Pepper, sensing the bull's impending charge, blows through his entire clip. All twelve rounds. The distance. The bullets make suctiony sounds as they enter the bull's chest and face, The bull, shocked and perhaps in some way relieved, crumples. Pepper lowers his service weapon, a wisp of gray smoke trailing upward as the bull heaves one last breath, tongue unfurling like red carpet. Almost seems to be smiling up at the deputy. Frothy blood leaks out from underneath the bull's lifeless body and snakes a path to the sewer grates.

The smell of spent gunpowder fills the humid air. The poleaxed crowd says nothing. Even Pepper's cop buddies keep mum, shifting nervous glances to one another. Paul Hoffman whimpers as he takes cover behind the fountain. Rooster nudges Amos and they slip away, unnoticed.

"Think they'll butcher that cow?" asks Amos, craning his neck behind them.

“Seems like a waste not to—should make some good burgers.”

“That cop, he’ll be neutered for sure.”

Rooster shrugs. “Who’s gonna take his gun away?”

They cut through an alleyway that smells like dirty diapers and burnt paper. Dutchman’s pipe coats the brick buildings. Amos, unlit cigarette tucked between his lips, tugs at the ivy, ripping off a heart-shaped leaf. He tears it up bit by bit as they head for the truck. Rooster chuckles, still in disbelief that Pepper spent his entire clip on the bull. Probably gonna need a skid loader and a trailer back at the square. Over half a ton of dead weight.

“I’ll get back to looking for that driver,” says Amos, flicking his cigarette butt across the street, where it skips into a storm sewer opening.

“No,” says Rooster. “Let’s eat. Later you can meet Pepper and give him his money.”

“Okay, but I don’t understand the plan. Don’t understand it all.”

“Pepper’s gonna feel like the town pariah—he’ll do whatever I ask him.” A desperate but resourceful cop will turn up a lot more than Amos ever could.

They take South Main Street down to East Iowa Avenue and hook a right on Locust Street, veering around the sheet metal factory, air thick with the smell of oxy-acetylene torches. The evening shift works three-thirty to midnight, or until two in the morning if there’s overtime posted. Recently gutted and remodeled, with single girder top-running overhead cranes and brand new welding, cutting, drilling, lathe, and paint-spraying booths, the foursquare building thumbs its nose at the postindustrial age. Long

ago, when it was yet a decaying brick eyesore with shattered double-hung windows, when union members were still called tin knockers, Rooster's father had been a foreman of some notoriety. He lived and died in that old factory.

Rooster and Amos take Locust Street all the way to the Trapdoor Bar and Grill. Lance, the bartender, nods at Amos. Chairs with vinyl backs wear a sheen of grease from all the fried food. In the back a man plays pool by himself. Balls crack against each other on the break. Butt rock plays on a stereo behind the bar, frontman's pseudo growl, guitar shred, drum solo. Rooster sits at the bar and asks Lance if he can turn down the music.

"Customers like it, especially the lunch crowd. Ambiance." He pronounces the last word with a French affectation, which annoys Rooster to no end.

The lunch crowd, those who are oblivious to the goings-on at the town square, ambles in. Construction and factory workers. They eat burgers and play cards: gin rummy, Rook, spades. A few daring, borderline alcoholics order a beer even though their shift isn't over. Trapdoor has two beers on tap: Bud Light and Bud Heavy.

"Shoulda won that derby, Amos," says Lance.

"Thanks," Amos replies with a one-shoulder shrug.

Lance runs his hand along his lips and says, "Maybe you should shave the goatee, see if that oughtn't turn your luck."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing was rigged, anyways. Betcha Engle was in cahoots with the winner and got his prize money back after the dust settled. Winner

was an out-of-towner, you know. Look back at the derby's history—how many times that happened?"

Amos groans and orders Bud Heavy with a shot of whiskey. Rooster says he'll have the same, but make his beer-back a Bud Light. Doesn't want to fill up before he eats, he explains.

"Lance, got a hypothetical scenario for you."

"Trick question?"

"No, no, nothing like that," says Rooster. "Say I was to run for mayor. I'd have your support, right? Could hold meetings in the Trapdoor?"

Liquor bottles clink as Lance digs out the well whiskey. His back to Rooster, he says, "I always assumed Mark Zickefoose would run. He's a family man, goes to church, owns both Mi Hermano restaurants, the one here and in Red Oak. Think he went to ISU, business school. I'm not saying *I'd* vote for him, but other people probably would. He'd be a tough man to beat."

"I own a business. I've been baptized, or so they tell me." Rooster tinks the shot glass with his overgrown thumbnail. He can smell the good burn of cheap whiskey, anticipating it on the back of his throat. "What if I had a kid? What if I was a family man?"

"Sure. Sure, Rooster. That'd change things. But, uh...election's in a few months. You run any radio spots? Newspaper ads? These days it's all about marketing, branding."

"Lemme see your phone book."

“I’ve got all the taxi cab numbers here.” By all the numbers he means two, scratched in blue ink on the wall beside stacks of liquor bottles.

“It’s Monday morning,” says Rooster. “How hammered we gonna get?”

Lance makes a surrendering gesture. “Judge not, I always say. But, uh...another drink and I’ll have to collect your keys. House rules.”

“Whatever. Just give me the phone book.”

“I’ll get it. I’ll get it, Rooster. Keep your shirt on.”

CHAPTER 17

Monday, and the visitors need clean clothes.

“After that, you can head out,” suggests Sid.

Eden flashes him a look—nothing scornful, just studying his face like a gypsy might read tarot cards. Sid doesn’t avert his gaze. So what if he’s blunt? He’s just telling the truth, that everyone would be happier if they parted ways.

“Don’t be rude,” says Hank.

“Like *you* feel any differently,” says Sid.

They sit around the kitchen table, another late breakfast just consumed. Bobby pats his swollen tummy. The adults sit on the edge of their seats.

Hank harrumphs. “Eden, you stay as long as you like. Make yourself at home. I’ll show you how to use the washer—it’s an antique. Older’n me.”

Eden eyes Sid, undoubtedly aware that Hank’s playing her against him. “I don’t have any soap,” she says.

“Whatever,” says Sid, and he grabs a mystery novel from Hank’s bookshelf, careful to avoid the big Family Bible, and makes for the back porch. The porch swing’s chains, fixed to the roof with eyelet bolts, buckle as he sprawls out. He scrapes away paint flakes and opens the book. Detectives and serial killers. After reading the first few sentences, he flips to the end to find out whodunit, but nothing makes sense. The surprise is unearned, ineffective.

Inside the farmhouse, Hank teaches Eden how to make her own detergent. His loud voice booms through the screen door. Might come in handy on the road, he says. Nothing better than making something with your own two hands. Powder or liquid?

“Oh, liquid,” says Eden. “Definitely.”

First they grate a bar of soap. Lavender perfumes the air, wafting out onto the porch. Bobby thinks it’s the funniest thing ever, purple shards raining down.

“Like cheese,” he says, and Sid can just picture his stupid smile.

“Now the Borax,” says Hank. “Borax and washing soda. Gotta heat the soap and leave it overnight. In the meantime you can use some of mine.”

Sid groans and stretches out on the porch swing. Things quiet down. He uses the paperback novel for a pillow, which isn’t bad—he had more uncomfortable pillows during his first deployment—and inside of ten minutes he’s out cold. He doesn’t dream this time. No crash. No fire. No pain. But he does sleep through lunch, waking up to the sound of Hank’s oversized washing machine, which rocks back and forth in spin cycle. Sid frowns. What’s she washing, cowboy boots?

The paperback novel’s cover has a matte-like finish, slippery from his sweat. Maybe he did dream. Maybe he’s only stopped remembering when he does. Giving the book a wet-dog shake, he rises and moves to the door.

“Excuse me,” says Eden.

Sid steps out of the way as she two-hands a laundry basket and works the screen door handle with her butt. He returns to the porch swing and watches her inspect the sturdiness of Hank’s rotary clothesline. Jeans and t-shirts she flaps before hanging.

Wooden clothespins squeak. The sun, wearing a cloudy skirt, slumps westward. Sid turns away in embarrassment when Eden pins a pair of yellow lace panties.

“Guess I’ll go get that fuel now,” he says loudly.

“Hang on, flyboy,” says Hank, poking his head out. “Come help with the Subaru. Gas doesn’t do much good if the car’s not running right.”

Sid trudges behind Hank as they make their way around the house and into the barn. They jack up the Subaru’s front end and squeeze a cinder block under the frame. Crawling underneath, Sid half hopes the car falls and puts him out of his misery. Hank feeds him a three-quarters ratchet and six-inch extension bar and tells him what to look for.

“Near the oil pan. See it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know where it is. Can’t you do this?”

“Not much fun in that,” says Hank.

An hour passes. Two. Sid hates how thorough Hank is. They met in Missouri but Hank moved on to Hurlburt, a base in Florida from which he departed the military just two weeks shy of his retirement date. An AWOL chaplain hiding out in Iowa, though Sid’s unsure how badly the Air Force wants to find him. Crazy old man and his crazy ideals. It doesn’t surprise Sid, though, since the few times Hank came around the propulsion maintenance bay, overdressed in his service blues and glossy oxfords, he’d point out minor issues with the gearbox or combustion section or fan rotor clearance or whatever was being worked on. In all aspects of life, Hank has to have things *just so*.

“They need to be on their way,” mutters Sid. He gives the socket a spin, gears winding. “Are we almost done? It’s late.”

“You brought them here,” says Hank. “Go tell them to leave. They have enough fuel to make it into Comstock. I’ll finish here, you tell them to beat it.”

Sid scoots out and slams his ratchet into the toolbox and storms out of the barn, burning a path to the nearby field. Cool air rises from the dirt. Crickets rejoice. The cornfield, lined with knee-high stalks, portions the sun into an orange slice. Heat gets wavy on the horizon.

He wants to get rid of Eden and Bobby for the same reason he picked them up: they remind him of his family. They remind him of his former roles: husband, father. But he’s been alone for a while. Gotten used to it. The more passengers, the more complicated the ride.

“Guess we’ll work on the Subaru later,” Hank calls from the barn.

*

That night, after Eden and Bobby go to bed, as Sid’s burning two slices of toast and looking for a jar of peanut butter, Hank pulls a rifle from the basement gun cabinet and brings it upstairs.

“Spotted a coyote in the orchard just now.”

Sid doesn’t budge. Big deal, a coyote. They’re nocturnal anyhow.

“He was shaking, salivating, and his eyes didn’t look right. Yellow and glazy.”

“Rabid?”

“Time I got my gun unlocked, he disappeared. But I doubt he went far. If the boy’s running around outside tomorrow, that could mean trouble.”

Hank hands over the rifle, which is heavier than Sid anticipates. A bolt action .22, barrel as long as his extended arm. Enough room for twelve shots if you lock one in first. Gold bead for the front sight, rear sight adjustable. Wood finish. Nice shoulder strap.

“I dunno, Hank. Me and guns...”

“It’s just a .22. Pea shooter. Enough for a coyote, though, if you aim center mass.”

“This is a bad idea.”

“Don’t worry, I trust you.”

Sid’s toast pops up. “That makes one of us.”

Hank slides the shotgun’s pump back so he can peer into the ejection port. Sid doesn’t ask if it’s loaded or not, just assumes it always is, though the shotgun usually has a gun lock on it, a black rectangular case that fits over the trigger. All the other firearms are locked in a safe in the basement.

“I shouldn’t’ve brought them here,” offers Sid.

“Nope.”

He spreads peanut butter over a slice of toast. “You’re still mad.”

“Eh.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” says Hank, shoving extra shells, both slugs and birdshot, into his front pockets. “Let’s go see what we can see.”

Outside, so many stars shine through the sky is more white than black. Even the darkest parts look deep purple. They start their coyote hunt at the orchard and move out toward the cow pasture, but except for the farm animals, there isn't much to see, even with Hank's high-powered spotlight sweeping left and right. Sid keeps the .22 unloaded and strapped around his shoulder as he follows along. He yawns so big his jaw clicks.

"Bored or tired?" asks Hank.

"Can I only chose one?"

"Smart aleck."

They march on. The clean country air is overpowered by the smell of gun oil and stainless steel. It takes Sid back to basic training, when his flight qualified at the firing range during warrior week. Three dozen M-16s erupted. The morning roared. He thought, this is what it sounds like? Like this? Brass sprinkled down and worked its way into his uniform, a cascade of spent shells, warm and tingly, like an angel was tickling him. Every year after that he had to requalify, even though he was merely an aircraft mechanic.

"Coyote's gone," says Sid. "If it was here in the first place. Next time I stop by, I'm bringing you some glasses."

"I saw what I saw, no mistaking."

"Sure, sure."

In the woods, tree branch shadows wriggle across the floor like sinister, spindly fingers. It's impossible to sneak around with all the rustling leaves and snapping twigs. Hank's spotlight starts blinking, so he slaps it a few times. Old mechanic's trick, so to speak, but it doesn't work: the spotlight begins to dim.

“I’ll charge it in the barn.”

“Are you serious? That’ll take hours.”

Hanks frowns. “So we head out again tomorrow night.”

“Whatever you say, Chappie.”

Sid heads for the house. He’s feeling tired so he goes upstairs, leans the .22 in the corner by the door, and collapses on his twin mattress.

*

That night he dreams. Of falling in love years ago, an E and an O. Sid, an enlisted man, Jess an officer. Technically the USAF allows officer/enlisted marriages, but there was a problem. Something growing inside of her and impossible to hide for long. The squadron OIC told her she’d have a difficult time making rank. Her career was over before it got started.

She got out and had Tabitha. A couple years later Sid finished his enlistment and they moved into a little house in Iowa Falls, the town he grew up in. He did administrative work for the guard unit out there, on the civilian side. Sid found the military a lot more tolerable with the absence of saluting or marching in formation or ironing blues; even so, he felt as though his life had at once become stagnant, meaningless, and was unsure whether he could make it as a family man. Doubt set in. He wondered if they got married first for convenience, since they were already pregnant, and for Jess, as a way to thumb her nose at the Air Force.

In the midst of this marital malaise their family took a day trip down to Winterset. It was a rainy weekend and Jess and Tabby had never seen the John Wayne museum. In

lieu of an actual inheritance, Sid's dad left him the Imperial. "Let's take the old classic out for a spin," he said. Jess rolled her eyes but acquiesced. They packed a picnic and everything, praying the weather was better down south. I-35 was congested at first, but outside Des Moines traffic let up. Tabby echoed every other word they spoke, keeping them from arguing too much. Jess sighed and put her legs up on the dash, her feet leaving a gray halo of condensation on the windshield. And that was it.

*

He wakes up sweating and breathing hard. Phantom heat subsides on his arm, scars from where he tried pulling them out of the burning wreck. Six years ago. In Iowa, the statute of limitation for vehicular manslaughter is half that. Even if Sid does find the man in the Trans Am, there isn't anything Lady Justice could do. It'll be up to Sid. Frontier justice. He laughs bitterly. What's the point? Six years without any answers, life strung along by car crashes at county fairs.

The smell of gun oil lingers on his hands. In the corner by the door, the .22. He works off the sock to his right foot and rolls out of bed, taking the rifle before laying back down. Sliding the bolt back, he spies a brass cartridge. Long rifle round. Those can do some damage, especially at close range. He concentrates on the white ceiling, stares at the blankness of it all for several minutes. The rifle is as long as his mouth to his knees. He brings his right foot up, flamingo-style.

The rifle clatters on the wooden floor. Tuesday morning. That halfway point between derbies, when he's feeling at his very lowest. Hunting town by town for the Trans Am usually serves as a distraction. Not this week.

He dons a white t-shirt and some woodland-patterned BDU pants, the kind worn before the USAF switched over to digicam. Pots and pans clatter around the kitchen like a bad drum solo. The upstairs toilet flushes. Sid nabs the scrap-chain quilt off his twin mattress and escapes down the steps, out the back door.

Outside, he flaps the quilt and spreads it out on the grass, morning dew dampening the fabric despite its thickness. As he stretches, his joints ache, knees and elbows pop. Been a while. He cycles through every pose he can remember and even makes up a few. During his transition from downward dog to cobra, he notices Bobby peering out behind the barn. Bobby holds his hand in a frozen salute, shielding his eyes. His other hand rests against the barn's weathered wood. Dandelion and poor man's pepper sprout around a roll of chicken wire near Bobby's sneakered feet.

"Well, come out then, kid," says Sid.

Bobby tiptoes out, arms behind his back, eyes following the scarred path on Sid's bare arm from wrist to shoulder.

"No beauty pageant crowns for me," says Sid, forcing a stiff smile. He grabs his jacket and leans back in corpse pose. Bobby nestles in alongside Sid, who in turn scoots to the opposite edge of the quilt. Clouds drift lazily along and every so often crows, yakking away, slip across the blueness. A 747 threads white yarn east to west. They lie there and cloud-gaze.

Sid says, "This is Savasana. The art of sitting still." When he squints, the jet trail looks like a fuzzy rope. "I learned yoga in the Air Force. This female lieutenant insisted we do it for squadron PT."

Every story has a happy ending if you know where to stop. They sit in silence for a moment, until Bobby, apropos of nothing, says, “Hank has army men.”

“What?”

“Army men. A whole bucket of them.”

“Toys,” says Sid. “Yeah, I guess he does.”

“Army and Air Force are different.”

Sid laughs. Sure enough.

“What kind of plane did you fly?” asks Bobby, yawning and mimicking Sid’s arm placement.

“No plane-flying for me—I was a grease monkey.”

“Monkey?”

“Mechanic.”

“But you know how?”

“To fly? Sure, why not.” In theory, anyway. Sid’s base knowledge consists of an incentive flight in a T-38, a few high-speed taxis on the runway, YouTube instructional videos, a computer flight sim he never quite mastered, and a book called *Learn to Fly: The Illustrated Guide* purchased at the I-80 truck stop.

“I like planes,” says Bobby.

“Me too. The way my recruiter pitched it, anyone can fly if they want. But I scored high on my ASVAB in mechanics—not sure how *that* happened—so they stuck me turning wrenches. Worked on some sweet planes, though.”

“Big planes?”

“Heavies, not so much. A-10s mostly. Warthog. Got a damn big gun on it, thirty mil. Bad guys called it the Cross of Death. Our guys, of course, loved seeing that t-shape cut through the sky.

“This one time we pulled the engines off an A-10 that just got back from Incirlik. It was all painted up, shark teeth on the nose, decals up around the cockpit. Stick figures for each confirmed kill. Kinda reminds me of the way some people decorate their demo cars. Little different, I guess. Now that I think about it, kill decals are kinda off. Bit celebratory. That’s all well and good for derby but when you’re mowing people down in the desert, knowing women and children might be getting in the way...you don’t paint collateral damage decals, just ignore them. Women shot in half, children with their faces blown off. Cripes—sorry, kid. Sorry about that. Not sure how my mind went there. Don’t listen to me, I dunno what I’m talking about.”

Sid lifts an eyelid. Bobby’s breathing steadily, snoring mildly. His lips part and emit a low whistle, tummy rising and falling in perfect rhythm. Birds chirp in a nearby meadow. Prairie warbler. Some type of thrush, maybe a junco. Goldfinch. Buzzy zeet, kew-kew-kew. The sun warms Sid’s face. A nap sounds pretty good. He closes his eyes and lets his mind sit still.

CHAPTER 18

Eden paces the living room, weighing her options. Certainly she can't return to Heritage, not unless she wants to end up like Zeke. With her savings depleted, prospects ahead don't look all that great either. Say her and Bobby make it to Salt Lake City. Say Rooster doesn't have someone waiting to intercept them. Then what? Eke out an existence while always looking over her shoulder?

While she's planning, she sees Hank carrying a small rifle from upstairs down to the basement. He doesn't notice her. When he returns empty-handed, the startled look on his face makes her think he either forgot they were there or hoped they had disappeared, vanished into thin air overnight. "Uh," he says. Pops a few knuckles by grinding his fist into his palm. "Where's the boy?"

"Bobby went outside, looking for Sid."

Hank: retired military, living off the grid. Liquidated his assets at one time or another, so he must have significant cash hidden somewhere. He seems a little paranoid, and the paranoid don't lock up their valuables—they hide them somewhere private. Getting into the headspace of a black retired Air Force sergeant from Florida might be a challenge, but Eden has time to kill.

"Off to feed the cow," says Hank, making for the door.

"Fun," she says, though it seems the polar opposite. "I'll come with."

Dew still clings to the grass, squeaking against her bare feet. She gulps air and struggles to keep up with Hank's long stride. The last time Eden ran around barefoot this much was elementary school recess. It would've been so easy to stick a pair of flip-flops

in her duffel bag. Just think of all the shoes she left behind: penny loafers, moccasins, classic black pumps, silo boots for the idea of going out (for once Bobby arrived she rarely ever did), oxfords, docksides, wedges, ballet flats, and a variety of sandals and flip-flops. But no. She had to step into those kitten heels, blue, polka-dotted, a half-size too small, impractical for anything but a few hours at the bar, dances held in check.

The orchard is a five minute walk behind the house, halfway up a rise that leads into the woods. Good drainage plus limited wind exposure, Hank explains, showing her which apples to pick: anything bruised, anything soft, anything with holes. The trees—fifty or so—are each wired to a wooden stake running parallel with their trunks.

“Quite an operation,” says Eden. “You’re some kind of farmer, huh?”

“Bondsman to the soil.”

Hank forms a makeshift sack with his shirttail and they transport the apples to the pasture. Cow pies, some hardened and blanched white by the sun, landmine the field. The cow flicks her tail and shimmies her muscular neck, shooing away horseflies and gnats. It’s been a while since Eden’s seen a cow up close. Fine white whiskers circle the end of her brown snout, which fades to a pinkish-white at her nose. Big black eyes look sad and lonely.

“She have any calves?” ask Eden.

“Not that I know of,” says Hank, unfolding a pocket knife and slicing an apple in two. He hands a heart-shaped half to Eden. The cow presses her chest into the fence and sniffs the apple cautiously.

“What’s her name?”

“Cow,” says Hank.

Eden yawns. The country may have a certain appeal, but she misses certain things about Heritage, whether you want to call them luxuries or amenities or, as she sees it, basic human needs. Out here, the well water smells funny. No central air. No cable or internet. She has no job or friends. Friends—it occurs to Eden that when she needed help, when it was a life-or-death matter, she chose a complete stranger over her lifelong friends Shelby and Caroline. So that’s it—she’s alone.

The cow finally licks Eden’s open palm with a sticky, scratchy tongue the length of a garden trowel, gathering in the last apple half. Eden whisks away her hand.

Hank rubbernecks, scanning the back yard. “Thought Sid would be coming out here.”

All is calm. In the distance, three v-winged turkey buzzards circle a field. Squirrels chitter in the nearby woods. Eden plucks a black-eyed susan and offers it to Cow, who turns up her nose. So far, Hank’s kind of a closed book. Her thoughts turn to Sid. She asks why he wanders the countryside crashing cars into other cars weekend after weekend. Not a nine-to-five type?

“Who is, really?” Hank scrunches his face toward the rising sunlight. He’s searching for something. An animal. Words, maybe. “At first his nickname was Crash. He was wild. Handles himself real good these days.”

“I saw him.”

“Oh yeah? I’m trying to get him interested in fixing them up, but you can’t change people’s ways that easily.”

“That classic in the barn,” guesses Eden.

Hank nods but doesn't say anything. They leave the cow pasture and wander back toward the house. Eden frowns. Didn't learn anything about Hank. Not much about Sid, whom she spies in the grass near the barn. Bobby's there too—she hopes he's not getting too attached to Sid. The boy is all heart: he loves quickly, fiercely. That was Eden's story once upon a time, but no longer. Better off for it.

The floor creaks as Eden heads into the living room. You don't realize how plastic modern houses are until you hear the way an old farmhouse creaks. There's lumber everywhere. Footsteps yammer in bedrooms and on stairs, walls sigh against the wind, and windows close with a pleasing wooden crunch.

“Guess we should pack up,” says Eden.

“Oh, about that.” Hank rattles his molars. “I was thinking. Might be safer if you stay here a few more days.”

“But it's Tuesday already.”

In response, he merely shrugs.

When they arrived, Eden felt like Hank couldn't wait to get rid of her. Now the farmhouse is an extended-stay motel? She knows she shouldn't question generosity, but can't help it. “Why the change of heart?”

“This guy, Rooster. All you have to do is wait him out. If he murdered someone, the cops will arrest him sooner or later. A matter of time.”

“You don't know Heritage,” says Eden. “Zeke Hartz disappearing isn't exactly front page news.”

CHAPTER 19

Heritage Morning Journal is a red brick building two blocks from the square on Washington Street, flanked by Beatty Insurance and a Chinese buffet. Three concrete steps lead to dual glass entry doors that have handles instead of knobs, which Rooster considers a nice, professional touch. Inside, the vaulted-ceiling reception area smells like fried food. No one's manning the desk, but a paper tent has a be-right-back message scrawled on it. Window blinds zebra the incoming sunlight. HMJ used to track statewide news—Council Bluffs to Cedar Rapids and everything in the middle—but since the younger O'Toole took over, it mostly covers local fluff pieces like the Milligan affair and the school board's funding discrepancies and a felled Limousin bull on the town square.

“My dad's been retired for the better part of a decade, so it's really me who runs the show. Not sure why you want to meet *him*. We have a significant online presence and Dad hates computers. He's a Luddite, eschews technological advances of all sorts.”

“I know what Luddite means,” snaps Rooster.

“Most people think the average newspaper is written at a fifth-grade level,” says O'Toole without taking a breath, “but that's untrue. New studies show it closer to tenth or eleventh grade. Naturally I err on the lower side, favoring readability over challenge. People don't like being challenged.”

“They certainly do not,” says Rooster, trying to get around O’Toole and head down the long hallway to the archive room. Heritage Morning Journal keeps reel upon reel of microfilm and even some microfiche—a matrix of tiny images on a flat sheet that looks like a stamp booklet. Old school, but Rooster knows he needs to go back to the Journal’s glory days. They’ve only recently digitized the paper.

“There’s a rumor going around town,” says O’Toole, “that Ezekiel Hartz is missing.”

“So?”

“Nothin’, just thought you two knew each other.”

“In passing.” Rooster pauses. “Hey, you run campaign ads in your paper, right? How much for a full page?”

O’Toole picks his nose and nods. “We are a disinterested paper, but I can probably cut you a deal. Send me a proof—PDF if possible.”

They halt at the doorway. The word ARCHIVES rainbow-arcs across the door’s frosted glass. “I’d better head back,” says O’Toole, his hand covering the doorknob. “Tuesday is penny saver day. Not as titillating as a missing person case, but...” He opens the door and starts to complete his thought, but decides better. He walks briskly up the hallway.

It’s a 10x10 windowless office, walls naked save a hanging clock formed out of the cross section of a log: the big and little hand tick around concentric circles. Stained cherry red, with the Roman numerals III, VI, IX, and XII carved neatly into their appropriate spots. Three desks pushed against the walls make the room even smaller, and

there's barely enough room for Rooster to squeeze in and politely nod to the elder O'Toole—Senior, as he is called by many.

“Morning,” says Rooster.

Senior's eyebrows caterpillar-crawl. He has a balding, mottled head fringed with white hair. Looks not unlike an anorexic Colonel Sanders. Bones shift, creak, pop, as Senior first attempts to stand before resigning to a more sedentary pose. He plants himself back down on the wooden sheaf-back chair and offers Rooster a handshake, cold but surprisingly firm.

“Morning. Here are a few items for you to peruse,” says Senior, his voice coarse with phlegm. He wears a short-sleeve oxford that has a starch-stiffened collar. Every button is fastened, top included, and the tail's tucked in.

Rooster expected to need the microform reader, but Senior rolls his fingers across a stack of yellowed newspapers on the desk. Paperclipped to each edition is a 3x5 that offers descriptors such as “2002 Derby, No Winner Declared” and “Heritage County Derby Cancelled” and “1997 Woodburn Derby, Accident.”

“How'd you find all these?” asks Rooster.

The old man harrumphs.

Silly question. Everyone needs a purpose in life, and from the looks of it, Senior spends his days ironing shirts and watching Junior turn the Heritage Morning Journal into a gossip rag, excited about nothing more than pie day. Even though he'd never admit it, Senior leapt at the chance to be useful again; the excitement was evident in his voice when Rooster called him yesterday.

Rooster makes his way through the stack of anything and everything on demolition derbies from the past two decades. He figures if someone can dig up dirt, it's Senior. But after rifling through the papers, Rooster comes up empty. Nothing that points to the man who whisked away Bobby and Eden three nights ago.

“That’s all?”

Senior frowns.

“Eh. It was a long shot, anyway.” Rooster thanks him for the trouble, leaves a fifty-dollar-bill on the desk, and starts for the door.

“That’s all the requested material I could find, but there’s this bit of trivia loosely tied to demolition derby,” says Senior. His chair’s casters squeak as he rolls over to the other side of the room and finds another wrinkled paper. “Six years ago, a Chrysler Imperial crashed on I-35, killing both passengers.”

Rooster rubs his grizzled jaw.

“Imperials are banned from most standard demolition derbies because of their frame.” Senior illustrates this with two shaky, outstretched hands. “Basically a truck chassis, thicker and heavier than most cars to begin with, but Chrysler also gave it an O-frame.”

“So...?”

Senior laughs. “You don’t know much about cars, do you?”

Rooster begrudgingly laughs along. He knows a lot about the trunk of a car and what can fit inside. That it beats walking or riding a bike. That the back seat is too

crammed to fool around in. As for the rest of the car, whatever's ticking and clicking and humming inside, he couldn't care less.

“The Imperial frame doesn't have any crumple spots. Nowadays vehicle frames have soft spots so the occupants don't absorb the impact of a crash. Like the way your shocks mitigate bumps in the road. Anyhow, Imperial's are banned from the track and unwanted on the road. Can't find a home anywhere.” Senior's momentarily distracted, as though he just recognized a kinship with the car. He shakes his head. “That was only on the Sixties model, I believe.”

Rooster thumbs through the paper, finding a brief story someone wrote up about the accident. Woman and child, unresponsive at the scene, pronounced DOA at Mercy Medical Center. One survivor: husband/father, ex-military. Spent a week in ICU with third-degree burns, multiple lacerations, and various broken bones. Claimed that another car pushed them off the road, although the write-up doesn't include a description. Police didn't turn up much of nothing. Below the article there's a stock military photo, black and white, snapped in basic training judging from the buzz cut. Sid Rivers, Air Force veteran.

*

Later, knocking back tall boys at Rooster's trailer, Amos offers confirmation: that's the guy he stood down at the Wagon Wheel Tavern. The one talking to Eden before she ghosted. Even with the buzzed, military-style haircut, says Amos, you just don't forget that *look* he has about him. Frickin' hard stare and all.

“Sid Rivers,” says Rooster. Late evening light sifts through the kitchen window and kaleidoscopes off the sinkful of dishes. He cleans a glass with his shirttail and fills it with water. “Guess that’s something of an Indian name.”

“Even told me he was Air Force. *Chair* Force. Sat on their asses the whole war.” Amos paws at a bowl of pretzel sticks. He sucks on them one at a time, twirling them in his mouth like a kid with a thermometer. Letting the salt crystals melt on his tongue. He reaches over and drops a soggy pretzel stick in a glass ashtray, the pile like a miniature campfire.

“That’s gross,” says Rooster, dumping his water back into the sink.

“Cigarettes,” explains Amos. “I’m quitting for good this time.”

“Sure you are.” Rooster tells Amos to look again, to be certain this is the same guy from the bar. He can’t afford any mistakes at this point. It’s already been too long—they could be states away.

“All right.” Amos wipes his hands on his pants and sips his beer. “I’m sure. Frickin’ hard stare. Air Force thinks he’s tough. The hell you find him?”

“I’m a trapper, but I also hunt. I’m gonna slip back into the Hartz house, see if I can’t use this new info to our advantage. You, get this picture out there. And I mean *out* there. Put everyone on alert. Someone’ll’ve seen something.”

Amos asks who he should call. Everyone, says Rooster. Weekend benders down to bottom feeders. The occasional mess, the habitual wreck, those who pay on time and those who need a not-so-friendly reminder, young and old, fiends, parolees, cops on the take. Those in Heritage County and beyond. The little towns: Bloomfield and Keosauqua

and Bonaparte. Hopeville, Thayer, Diagonal, Kent, Lenox, Beaconsfield, Comstock. Call the devil himself if you have to.

CHAPTER 20

The battle of tan soldiers versus green soldiers ends up one-sided thanks to Bobby, God of war, who picks off mine sweepers and field observers and oncoming bayonet holders with zero prejudice. The green army men have the high ground—they're on the arm of Hank's couch while the tan army men advance in vain on the cushioned valley, war cries transitioning quickly into swan songs. Bobby uses his stolen Hot Wheels car to ram a bazooka man; both car and army man rattle to a halt near Eden's bare feet.

"Careful," she says, standing flamingo-style, the little figurine pinched between her toes. "You'll break your car."

"I wish I had my Nintendo."

"Soon," she promises.

Bobby blinks, a dull stare, and accepts the army man.

"I been meaning to pitch those," says Hank, poking a finger into his mystery novel. "Got them from another officer, something like a gag gift. Sorry about that, always did find it hard to throw things away."

"Sorry about what?"

"They're sorta violent. Some moms...well, you know."

Eden shakes her head, a little annoyed with his phrasing. What—he thinks she's a bad mom? If the fridge postcards are any indication, Hank has a couple kids he only corresponds with via snail mail. She hates that moms and dads get judged differently. "Can't grow up around here without seeing guns and knives and fistfights. I don't think a few army men'll wreck him."

“To think is much against the will,” muses Hank, returning to his novel.

Now that Hank’s offered free room and board to them for the foreseeable future, Eden finds his poetic philosophizing altogether intolerable. No wonder he lives alone. Pretty clear his mind is made up about everything—you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

The shadow box she noticed when they first arrived hangs above Hank, displaying a triangular-folded American flag alongside various ribbons and patches. Served in both Iraq wars and Afghanistan, Eden realizes. She asks why he joined.

“War,” Hank says absentmindedly, “is what keeps us busy.”

Wednesday. Hump day. Back in Heritage, she’d be working the morning shift, six to four, no breaks, with Bobby in daycare. Wednesdays are slow. No specials. After daycare expenses, and barring a great tip day, she’d come out twenty or thirty dollars ahead. Who would miss that rat race? Yet she does.

Sid clamors down the steps. Under his leather jacket his shirt is as wrinkled as elephant skin—he slept in his clothes again last night. His dark hair shoots off in a dozen different directions. Eden catches his body odor, a smell like rotten apples. The farmhouse also fills with old leather from his jacket. She wonders briefly why he never takes it off.

“Shower, town,” he says to no one in particular. Like he wanted to get out front of any possible questions. He grabs a towel from the linen closet.

“Think I’ll shower next,” says Eden. It’s Wednesday, halfway through the week, and if Hank doesn’t get that station wagon up and running soon, she and Bobby are

taking off on foot. Their clothes, what little they brought, are washed. Shower and pack, then figure how to get gone.

“Ladies first,” says Sid, tossing her a towel like offering first shower is some grand chivalric gesture.

“You called it,” she replies, tossing the towel back. He gives her an indignant roll-of-the-eyes and heads outside.

“Where’s he going?”

“Shower’s outside,” says Hank, “a solar thing I put up behind the barn. Take a bath upstairs.”

“But—”

“Trust me, bath’s nicer. I’ll watch Bobby. Go ahead.”

Sure.

Ten minutes later Eden stands naked and lost in front of the mirror, waiting for the tub to fill. She unfastens her earrings and sets them in a pile on the sink, next to her Marlboro Menthols. Steam roils around the bathroom. She sighs at the belt of fat that circles her waist. She sighs at the chicken pox scar near her eye, knowing people think it’s a meth scratch. She sighs at her dark roots, wishing for a bottle of dye. The same gray hairs are back, a half dozen strands at the base of her scalp that she thought would disappear if ignored long enough. Zeke aged her. Heritage aged her.

The circular mirror suspends by a coat hanger, the hook twisted around a drywall screw in the wall. Under the single sink vanity Eden finds a drawer full of rolled up

washcloths. She takes one and wipes mounting condensation from the mirror. Cigarette fumes might drift down the hallway, down the stairs. Better fashion some airflow.

The sliding window acts like it hasn't been pried open this century. Struggling with the lock, her peripheral vision catches movement. From up here on the second floor she has a perfect view behind the barn. The solar shower's just a vertical pressure tank with a tube up top, a cheap showerhead sprinkling out water. Valve down below, garden hose trailing off into the barn. Sid holds a bar of soap in his fist, working the soap into a fine white foam. He lathers his chin and cheeks and neck and shaves stubble away with a blue disposable razor. No mirror. He works by touch, from memory.

It's not just the first time in a long time Eden's seen a man naked—it's the first time, she realizes, any of Sid's upper body has been exposed. Thick hypertrophic scars cover his left arm, the skin raised and red and awful. More scar tissue than original flesh. The scar's pattern reminds her of a time she stepped on a frozen pond near Old Highway 6 and the ice began to crack. Zigzag pattern. Her heart leaps the same way it did back then, and she takes a step back into something wet.

She swears at the cresting tub water and leans over the bathtub like a doctor does a bedridden patient, twisting the knobs and draining enough to counteract her body weight. Pipes rattle behind the tub's splashboard. A small puddle accumulates on the floor. Her cigarette plops into the water, ruined. She catches her breath and then the only sound in the bathroom is her thudding heart.

After toweling up the mess, her eyes again wander outside. Sid's gone. Water drip-drops from the cheap showerhead, catching small glints of early morning sunshine.

Eden slides into the tub, tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her mind record-skips back to the conversation she had with Hank, when she asked why he joined. Surely he's wrong about war. There are, after all, other pursuits to keep us busy.

CHAPTER 21

The heart works well.

Also brains.

Ears, intestines, and assorted strips of flesh with coarse black hair still attached.

Pig parts produce a good stink.

Cockscombs, the fleshy crown of a male chicken. Clawed feet. Gizzards.

Cow tongue and tripe.

A thick leg bone the origin of which the butcher was unsure. But he had a good selection, a cornucopia of animal waste parts that he sold for a fairly reasonable rate.

Blood sloshes as Rooster mixes everything except the pig guts together. Those he sets aside.

He plops the Styrofoam cooler on the ground. Blood drips off his hands and spatters the dirt. From the tool shed, which sits adjacent to his trailer, he retrieves a can of antifreeze. He opens up the cooler lid and dumps the antifreeze in. The guts, rotten and foul, will beckon the mountain lion. When he gobbles up the entire affair, it'll put him down.

“That’s rank,” says a female voice, startling him. Meadow Gillespie, wearing frayed denim shorts and nothing else, is perched in the doorway of Rooster’s trailer. Brunette curls lay across her naked shoulders. She’ll be forty soon but her breasts haven’t heard the news. Muffin-topped. Appendectomy scar on one side of her waist, Playboy bunny tattoo opposite. What some men call a high mileage woman. She drops by from time to time.

“Didn’t notice you there,” he says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The trailer and all...guess you just blend in with the scenery.”

She plugs her nose and says, “Screw you.”

He licks blood off his first two fingers, a briny taste. Spits. Meadow blinks.

Rooster carries two small baggies, one anhydrous and the other a placebo. Nothing harmful in the latter. Looks just like meth, though. It’s for tomorrow, Thursday, when he makes his weekly visit to the Heritage Health Care Center. Rooster likes to have things ready. He pinches some anhydrous powder out with his clean fingers and inhales deeply.

Meadow steps down. “I might go for some of that.” Her eye shadow sparkles. Her teeth show signs of rot.

For a moment Rooster considers giving her the placebo, but then he thinks the best way to get rid of her might be to get her good and tweaked. Probably that’s why she stopped by anyway. Usually is. He shares.

“Now get dressed.”

“You don’t like?” Meadow executes a curtsy, the mixture of decorum and immodesty almost too much for Rooster to bear. He could tackle her right there in the dirt, but doesn’t. He’s an animal but there’s work to be done. Can, and will, deny those base instincts. That’s the key difference.

“I’ll call you,” he promises. “I’m busy right now.”

“Too busy for fun? All work and no play, you know.” With a pointer finger she tangles and untangles a curly lock of hair. A silver strand shines through. “Your loss.”

She disappears into his trailer. Rooster resumes his work. First he finds a spot for the bear trap. Leans a few pine nettles over its hungry jaws to give it that natural feel. Sure enough, it blends right into the environment. He's heard stories of careless trappers stepping on their own traps. Not a problem if you're using legal traps; you'll just walk away with a red face and a purple ankle tattoo. But the bear trap, with spiked teeth and hand-forged solid steel cross and bottom pieces, isn't so forgiving. Could snap a 2x4 in half. Could clamp down on your fibula, slicing right through—what is that, the tibia artery? If you're lucky you'll pass out, bleed out, then whatever comes after that. Rooster suspects nothing. Rather, he hopes for nothing. He can only conjure up a few of the Ten Commandments, but the ones he can think of he's broken repeatedly. Even added murder recently.

Meadow walks out, shirted up. She flips him off but it's a loving gesture. Her Malibu peels out the gravel driveway, popcorn popping sound of rocks kicking off her back bumper receding as she disappears.

Rooster smiles. The waiting is essential. If the cockscombs and cow tongues and everything else doesn't get a chance to absorb the antifreeze, all will be for naught. The mountain lion walks away with a mere bellyache. Rooster places the lid back on the cooler. The Styrofoam squeaks as it wedges into place. He sticks the untainted pig guts on top, then moves everything back into the tool shed. Coyotes will be crawling around his place tonight but they won't be able to get anything. He locks up.

CHAPTER 22

Sid's unlatching the trailer when Eden, wet hair, no makeup and no earrings, saddles alongside the pickup truck's back bumper. In the pickup bed sit three empty gasoline cans, their yellow spouts pointing to the cloudless sky.

"Heading out?"

Sid nods, eye-level with Eden's lower half. Tiny red nicks dash and dot her legs, Morse code. "That's the plan."

"You'll be careful, right?"

He wriggles free the electrical hookup, the plug coated with silicon grease. Black, green, yellow, and red wires are loosely girded with electrical tape. Sid pinkies some grease around the prongs, nose twitching at the vinegary smell. He wipes his finger on his pant leg while giving her a quizzical look.

"Bobby," says Eden, "wants to go with you."

Sid pops the hitch coupler and gives the lever a spin. Gears grind their teeth. As the trailer hitch clunks free of the bumper mount, he says, "That's a bad idea."

"Probably. But he begged and begged, and I can't keep him cooped up forever."

"I'm not some surrogate dad, you know. I'm just a guy. And it could be dangerous."

"In Comstock? Hank said it's a quiet old town. Not even any bars."

"No, just a damn big casino."

"Outside the city limits, though. It'll be fine."

“When I was Bobby’s age, I would always take off,” says Sid, rubbing his thumb along a scuff on top of the lightbulb-shaped tow ball. “At the grocery store, Wal-Mart, in church, in the library. And not just wander around the building, I mean I’d go for a stroll down the street. My favorite thing was climbing fire escapes, looking at the whole town from way up high. All those buildings, and somehow I never fell. Probably should’ve.”

“So you’re worried you’ll lose Bobby?”

“I’m just saying no one’s better at finding trouble than little boys.”

“He’s a pretty good listener. He does what I say. It’s funny, though—I think I need him more than he needs me. Keeps me clean.”

“Meth?”

She nods, turning red, like she regrets bringing it up. “I’ve been clean since I found out I was pregnant. Cold turkey except a couple Adderall pills on day three. Another one in the morning. Only five milligrams each but sometimes I think, you know, it messed him up somehow.”

Sid kicks chocks tight against the trailer tire. “Hell, I’m not one to judge. There was a time in my life, someone would’ve offered... What’s it like?”

“Like chocolate cake. Like falling in love for the first time,” she says wistfully. “Then it wears off and you feel like you’ve fallen down a crack in the earth. Zeke and I drove around tweaking and stealing, feeling like Bonnie and Clyde.”

Zeke worked the overnight at Benson Sheet Metal, she tells Sid, scraping enough for them to get by, and they were happy for a while. Then he started selling, claimed it’d be easier to sustain their drug habit that way. He earned Rooster a foothold in the factory,

selling to the tired, overworked late shift, but by then they were tweaking hard and often. On his nights off, they broke into people's houses and stole electronics, jewelry, that sort of thing. This lasted a few months, until the day Eden found out she was pregnant. She quit. So did he.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” says Eden. “Took a few handles of whiskey for Zeke to quit. Sometimes trading one addiction for another, lesser one is the best you can hope for. We got married. Things seemed okay enough. Then right around Bobby's second birthday, it all came crashing down. I came home early from my lunch shift at Goldschmidt's and there he was, smoking right in front of Bobby. Tried to stuff the tinfoil in his pants and burned his leg. That was the last straw.”

“Geez,” says Sid. He wipes his forehead with a shirtsleeve. “I was married once, long time ago.”

“Oh. Kids?”

“One. Girl. She...she, uh. Went with her mom.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Eden touches his arm—the arm he didn't reach inside the Imperial with, the one without scars, though with his jacket on you couldn't tell either way. “You seem like an okay guy. Get to see your girl at all?”

“Not so much.”

They stand silent for a moment. She squeezes his arm gently and then releases. Sid nods slowly and doesn't really know what's happening between them but says sure, Bobby can ride along. Eden waves toward the house, where Bobby's been lying in wait.

He races forward, nearly busting the screen door, and leaps into the F-150. After a few seconds he leans over and lays on the horn.

“Be careful,” says Eden, but there’s assurance in her tone, like all her worries about Rooster have gone to ground, at least for the moment.

Sid, however, is not the type of guy to forget. He suspects Rooster’s the same way. Might be a male trait, or maybe that’s just an excuse men use when they refuse to let things go. While Eden kisses Bobby goodbye, Sid rolls the trailer’s safety chain around his palm, tightens his grip, and hops in the driver’s seat.

*

Signs of civilization come slowly: the windmill near Hank’s farm, a crop duster strafing soybean fields, telephone wire strung along by way of wooden crosses. They hop on 115 and head south. Not much on the road save a flattened skunk, black and white fur over a lightning bolt streak of dried blood. Sid swerves, aligning his F-150 squarely over the roadkill. Get skunk on your tires and the smell won’t leave for a week. The odor washes over them as they zip past.

“Eww,” says Bobby, clothespinning his nose with two fingers. He tugs on his shoulder restraint, which locks after a few inches.

Sid’s a little surprised that Eden let Bobby come with him and a lot surprised that he caved in so quickly. After the accident, his therapist asked whether it bothered him to see other children, those who might be around Tabitha’s age when she died. Grief-stricken people tend to act one of two ways: repulsion, or inordinate love—a desire to recapture some essence of that which was lost. It happens quite frequently, his therapist

assured him. In Red Oak, a father who'd lost his teenage son in a tractor rollover kidnapped the neighbor boy. When the cops arrived the two were playing basketball on a hoop the father had bolted over their barn door. "I just wanted my wife to hear the noise," the father explained. The clang of the rim, the whisk of the net, the jubilant cry after a made basket. His wife had been a shut in since the accident. Five whole months.

A train approaches parallel with the F-150. Bobby pushes his face against the window, fingers tapping the glass. It's not like Bobby reminds Sid of his daughter; they're nothing alike. Tabitha was bold and talkative, Bobby shy and reticent. When Sid put a record on she would make up her own lyrics, singing in that high-pitched, nasally voice. Tabitha could tie her shoes by age three. He never had to teach her anything. Not that he had the chance, with a deployment to Iraq shortly after her birth and then a final rotation to Bagram where he missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and her second birthday.

"Six, seven, eight," says Bobby, who's more interested in counting cars than asking about the obscenities squirreled across their steel bodies. He loses track around twenty-something, skips a few numbers and starts in again at thirty-five. Names are painted on the riveted ribcages, and sure enough there's Bobby's name in loopy yellow. He gets a kick out of that, smiling a toothy grin Sid's way.

The train releases a terrific whistle. Up ahead, the tracks cross 320th, the road into Dogwood. Bells ring near the crossbucks. Candy cane-striped gates begin their slow-motion karate chop. Sid turns onto 320th and eases the truck to a halt. They wait for the train to pass, Bobby's head whipping back and forth like he's watching a tennis match.

"Okay," says Bobby. "Start over. One, two, three..."

Bobby doesn't remind him much of Tabitha; Eden is no Jessica. And yet there are similarities. Maybe that's inevitable. Like Eden, Jess was strong, fierce. Resilient. But Jess had a more worldly beauty and she was smarter, wittier, full of bon mots. Never seemed like he could get the last word in. Sid bites the inside of his cheek as train cars pass by. He *misses* her. As she was processing out of the Air Force, Hank, in a move that caught him no small amount of grief from upper management, married them where the Missouri River oxbows around Grand Pass, an area known more as a duck hunting spot than a romantic locale, but as Sid argued, "it'll do." Jess conceded that something more low-profile might be in everyone's best interests.

When they moved into base housing, a little two bedroom ranch-style home on Chennault Lane, not far from the BX, they thought all the hard stuff was behind them. But things weren't as easy on Jessica as they were on Sid. At the prop shop airmen and sergeants alike gave him knowing glances and even a few "attaboys" in the hallways. If you marry a beautiful woman, there are those that will say you married out of your league, but that's simply a matter of opinion. Sid, however, left no room for argument. He was enlisted; she was an officer. The disparity was sewn on their BDUs, and even though she no longer wore a uniform, people are slow to forget a thing like that.

In stark contrast to Sid's novelty, Jess became a pariah on base. It seemed like everyone knew she'd traded her commission for marriage (and to a *mechanic*, no less), so wherever she went—fitness center, bank, BK or Taco Bell—service members frowned at her. When Tabitha arrived things changed a little, not a lot. Before his DOS even came up, Sid was out the front gate and on the road. He'd saved up nearly two months' worth

of leave, and although the USAF technically still owned him, putting Whiteman AFB in his rear-view changed the entire composition of their marriage.

They wound up in Iowa Falls because Sid didn't have a better place to go and Jessica was eager to see where he grew up. Sid's mom, widowed several years by this point, was thrilled, having fallen more deeply in love with Jess and Tabby than Sid thought possible. Jess, originally from Pittsburgh, took a shine to small-town living that was at once inspirational and heart-breaking to Sid, for he no longer cared for Iowa Falls or the Midwest. But he remained for her sake, finding work at the local guard unit. He clocked in at 8:00 and left by 4:30, days X-ing off the calendar faster than he could keep track. He was miserable but unsure why, suspecting that he might be stuck in a cycle of self-pity that was utterly unwarranted. After all, between his two deployments, he'd seen parts of the world where things were a whole lot harder than they were in Iowa Falls.

And maybe that was it, he thinks as he sits in his F-150 waiting for the train to pass, that his deployments had sapped his faith in the good of people whereas Jess, who'd only deployed once, and to Guam at that, still maintained an optimistic belief that the military, even the Air Force that had turned its back on her, accomplished good and necessary tasks on a global level. Sid did not believe that about the military anymore, even if he couldn't yet articulate his feelings.

Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three graffiti-laced steel cars stretch out against the landscape. When the cross bucks rise, Sid and Bobby ease forward. A half mile ahead are the first indications of Comstock: a ranch house here and there, Big Dave's Car Wash, and the town welcome sign that boasts an 1854 birthdate. Comstock's an old coal mining

and meat packing town and as such warily met the postindustrial age. The mineshafts were a minor tourist draw in the 80s until a collapse trapped and suffocated two teenage lovers. Their bodies were never excavated, leaving them to haunt the once profitable labyrinth. If you venture near the mine's mouth, where crisscrossing chains discourage entrance, they say you can hear their revenants crying out for help.

Sid knows Comstock more intimately than other small towns on account of all the years he's wintered near here. He's picked up countless car parts from Hank's post office box, which is listed under the pseudonym John Brown. Hank snail-mails parts from a Chrysler manual, popping fifties and twenties in the envelope. The first time Sid told him he was crazy for sending cash in the mail, but they've yet to be burned.

They pass an insurance store and a barbershop. Sid hears the raspy putter of a push mower somewhere in the distance. Every happy town's the same; Comstock's fairly happy. People wave to one another in the street. A grain elevator on the east side of town employs most of the men. The municipal pool has a slide so tall and winding that folks from two towns over visit on hot weekends. An Indian casino stays open 24/7, collecting reparation money that most everyone feels altruistic in giving. From here Sid can just make out the top of the casino; blood red letters announce MESQUAKIE MOTEL. On Main Street there's a Dollar Saver and an ice cream parlor called Custard's Last Stand, both across from a mom-and-pop gas station. Sid cozies up alongside a diesel/gasoline combo pump. Bobby's nose smudges the glass, his breath painting the window. A neon ice cream cone sign lights the door of Custard's Last Stand.

“Maybe we’ll get root beer floats after we fuel up,” offers Sid. “They have arcade games too. Space Invaders or Galaga or something.”

Bobby’s grin grows to the size of a boomerang. He’s holding two army men, one tan and one green, grubby palms securing their plastic bodies. While Sid fuels the truck, the green army man takes position on the dash. The tan army man—molded with a grenade mid-throw—rappels down Bobby’s seatbelt and knocks over his enemy. Sid is struck with the simplicity of their warfare. Tan versus green. Everyone on the frontline, no one flying bombs away, no one loading up planes on the runway and wondering where those bombs would fall and who they’d kill and why. Other prop airman at Whiteman AFB worked on the B-2s, a stealth bomber that can carry twenty tons of ordnance. 40,000 pounds. It can also carry B83 thermonuclear gravity bombs, which are similar to the nuke dropped on Hiroshima in 1945...only seventy-five times more powerful. Would melt a lotta plastic.

Sid supposes *he* might melt out here today, with the feels-like temp in the triple digits. He tops off the jerry cans with an ethanol blend. Gasoline whirlpools in the red containers, a pleasing sound and putrid smell. The pump handle’s auto shutoff clicks as the final can is filled. He loads the cans into the truck bed.

“Hey, old man.”

Laughter punctuates the greeting, which came from over by the carwash. The bay door’s ajar, but a sign indicates future business has been deferred to Big Dave’s Car Wash on the north edge of town. Two youngsters, one in an unbuttoned flannel cutoff and the other shirtless, lounge near the open bay. They’re smoking cigarettes. Look old

enough to purchase tobacco but not booze. Twin dirt bikes, Yamahas caked with mud, rest against the side of the building. One blue, one green. No helmets, not that they'd be street legal anyway. Supposed to be towed. Sid ignores the loudmouth kids and reaches for the door handle.

“You like demolition derby, old man?”

The hell? Sid's mind races, wondering how they might get that impression from the F-150 or him.

The other guy says, “He's too old for derby, Kyle.”

Kyle, the shirtless one, French-inhales and speaks through a cloud of smoke.

“Sure is, Fritz. All washed up and hung out to dry.”

Ten feet of cracked asphalt, stained with gasoline spills and motor oil drips and coolant leaks, separates them. A Coca-Cola vending machines hums ominously beside Fritz, who fiddles with a cigarette burn in his sleeveless flannel. He pokes his finger through the hole and licks his lips and never once breaks eye contact with Sid.

“How old are you two?”

Kyle gives a rapid-fire, practiced response. “Young enough to know better, old enough not to care.”

Fritz nods his cantaloupe-shaped head in agreement, beady eyes no more than a vacant, narcotized stare. His buddy Kyle has cruel good looks, a fighter, handsome even with cauliflower ears and a broken nose that was never properly reset. Xylophone ribs but broad shoulders. The skull tattoo on his chest dances as he stands up.

For Sid, it's a little like staring into the past. Fifteen years ago he was that young buck shooting off his mouth and trying to claim a spot in what little territory he knew. Iowa Falls is Comstock is Heritage is every small town dotting the ninety-nine counties of Iowa. In a way the smallness just makes everyone more desperate. These two, they're desperate all right. Without the post-9/11 patriotism surge, Sid might've stuck around Iowa Falls and ended up looking like them.

Sid opens the driver's side door. He rolls up his window and moves the key back. On the radio, he finds the William Tell Overture, *Storm* section. French horns burst in over piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. E minor. Bobby doesn't react to the music; he's lost in army men world.

As Sid closes the door, Kyle says, "What is that noise? That's *awful*."

"Why are you asking about derbies?"

Fritz chuckles gruffly.

"A personal hero of mine asked me to keep an eye out," says Kyle, breathing blue-gray smoke.

"Promised us a car," says Fritz, his eyes lighting up. "Fully loaded, too. Maybe if—"

But Kyle rolls a backhand across Fritz's chest, a stop-talking gesture. He flicks his cigarette butt off to the side. The truck vibrates with sound. The vending machine's compressor kicks off, cooling cycle at rest. Pigeons coo on the gas station's roofline. Heat pours across Sid's back. "Dark hair," says Kyle, as though reminding Fritz of something. He pulls out a trifold paper.

“What is that?” asks Sid.

“A picture,” says Kyle. “Faux-toe-graph.” He opens the folded paper enough to peer inside. “It’s him. Nice job, Fritz.” His eyes flitter from page to Sid. “You killed someone? *You*? Don’t look like no killer, old man.”

Sid’s heart skips a beat. They think he killed someone? “You should get on your bikes and ride out of here,” he says with a dry throat.

“I dunno, Kyle. What if you’re wrong? I got deferred judgment. Let’s call it in.”

“It’s him, motor mouth. He’s just a lot older is all.”

Kyle hands the photograph to Fritz, who pockets it. Together they move in on Sid.

The gas station attendant pokes his head out the front door, an overhead bell chiming. He’s an old guy with a potbelly and coke-bottle glasses. The standoff pauses. He takes in the sight, magnified eyes filling his frames, then retreats like a shy turtle.

Sid’s all warm blood and nerves as he backs against his F-150, which vibrates as the *Ranz des Vaches* section begins, English flute, horn, triangle. G major. Sunrise, birds singing, all that. Both Kyle and Fritz have clenched fists and stand about three feet away. Smell like a carton of cigarettes.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” says Kyle.

That’s as far as he gets. Sid flicks the trailer’s safety chain out like a miniature whip, snapping it across Kyle’s forehead. He screams in pain and falls to his knees, blood dripping over his brow. It could’ve been worse—Sid was aiming for his eyes.

The rooftop pigeons scatter. As Fritz looks on in horror, Sid lunges ahead and delivers a crushing knee to Kyle’s ribs. A sickening crack follows. A lower rib—won’t

puncture his lungs, but it will press up against his diaphragm and make him feel like he's wearing a corset. Laced up for the big ball. Kyle coughs out blood, a red wildflower spattering the ground.

Kid has some fight in him, though. He swings from the ground, first missing completely, then backhanding Sid's right knee. It hurts more than Sid expects. He teeters but maintains his balance, while Kyle seizes this shift in momentum. The kid, rising from his knees, blood spilling down his chin, lands an uppercut to Sid's solar plexus. Sid stumbles further, almost back against the truck. Getting old, he tells himself, and that kid's got a helluva reach. Better not let him do that again.

"Kick his ass," says Fritz, who hops around excitedly but doesn't join the fight.

"Shut up," says Kyle, taking his eyes off Sid.

Sid darts in and boxes Kyle's ears with two flat palms. The clapping sound echoes in the empty car wash bay. As Kyle drops and writhes on the ground, Sid reaches out and grabs a fistful of Fritz's cutoff flannel, swinging for his nose. The blow doesn't land quite right—bottom knuckles barely connect, glancing off—but it's enough to break cartilage and draw blood, waterworks.

That's when Sid sees the gun. A little black revolver tucked into Fritz's waistband. .38 most likely. Small caliber, but people have been killed by smaller—.32 shorts, .30 carbines, .25 ACPs, even a pellet gun in freak accidents—and especially at this range. Fritz drapes a hand across the butt of the gun. Before he can draw Sid chickens him, wrenching an arm around his slippery-with-sweat neck. Almost squirms free. Almost. Sid yanks the pistol out of Fritz's waistband while shoving him against the

vending machine, head against tough plastic that gives but an inch. A pop can rattles loose as Fritz rolls over in front of the dirt bikes.

 Ringing fills Sid's ears. He tucks the revolver into his back pocket and makes sure the kid didn't break his neck. He braces himself on a dirty bike fender, finding a pulse in Fritz's carotid artery. Then he remembers the photo and digs through Fritz's back pocket. Two cheap lighters, a clear baggie the size of a matchbook and filled with white powder, and a Xeroxed copy of his basic training photo.

 "Rooster sent you," says Sid, pocketing the items. Fritz doesn't respond—he's unconscious or faking it pretty well. Sid slaps the kid's cheek a few times. Hmm. Not faking. Behind Sid, the William Tell Overture's finale begins, *March of the Swiss Soldiers*. Trumpets herald. E major with the full orchestra. Except the music is fading, trailing off even as it crescendos.

 When he spins around, Kyle is gone. Sid's truck, with Bobby still inside, hauls ass down Main Street, past the Dollar Saver and Custard's Last Stand.

CHAPTER 23

The ringing startles him. He knocks over a spool of wire and pricks his thumb with the sewing needle. A red gnat appears, the tiniest drop of blood centered on his thumbprint whorl. Like he was aiming for that exact spot. Rooster sucks his thumb and picks up the phone.

“What?”

“It’s me. Something came in off the wire, sounds like your guy.”

“Tell me what you know, Pepper.”

Static gargles.

“You still there?”

“Don’t use my name over the phone. What, Larsen let you do that? Not the way I do business.”

Pepper’s a lot more authoritative over the phone, Rooster notes. Weak men often are. The shield of technology can make a man feel invincible.

“So what did you hear?”

“Can’t say much over the phone. Just told you that. We need to meet up. Say the train station? Half hour?”

“At least let me know it’s worth the trip.”

“I canvassed the town, got a hit on your guy. They fueled up at Casey’s early Sunday morning, then headed west. Guess they paid in cash, so no receipt.”

“That’s it?”

“They probably have cameras...”

“So put out an APB.”

“We say ATL now. Attempt to Locate.”

“Alphabet soup,” laments Rooster. Pepper’s still on the other end—Rooster can tell by the gargling static. “Tell me about the Last Frontier, Pepper. Ever work a murder case?”

“Huh?”

“Alaska, numbnuts. Where you lived for three years.”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, plenty of violent crime. Worked ’em all.”

“Hmm,” says Rooster, and hangs up the phone. Returning to the taxidermy room, he picks the spool of wire off the floor. The back and head of his red fox were settling unnaturally. It was Rooster’s own fault—he left the thing in front of a window and the sunlight mangled it, made the fox look hunchback. No choice but to split it open, pat down the growth, and resew.

Wind sings through the trailer. Outside, dust devils scurry to and fro, whirlpooling empty cigarette packs and other tossed-asides. Somewhere out there his mountain lion roams. He can sense it. Soon. Rooster punches in the bank’s number and then hits Wendy’s extension. The other line rings only once before it’s answered.

“Joe?”

“No. Rooster. You get those financials back yet?”

“Been a little distracted.” Wendy separates her words with exacting pauses, a sure sign she’s PO’d. “Lotta talk around town.” Rooster can picture her all done up: lipstick, sundress, hair glued into place with a gallon of hairspray, sitting behind the glass partition

of the drive-thru and admiring her own reflection. “People say Meadow Gillespie’s been over at your place. What’s she doing over there, Rooster?”

“Making a purchase, that’s it.”

“You let her stop by? Not like you let anyone else just pop in.”

“It’s Amos. He’s keen on her.”

“She’d never go for that lug.”

“Well, you know what they say—the heart wants what it wants.”

“That’s about as sappy as a maple tree.”

“The financials, Wendy.”

“*Fine.* John Patrick Pepper recently re-opened a defunct checking account that was about seven years old. Filled it up with nine grand. Took a thousand bucks out every Friday or so for two months. No deposits other than the original one.”

So Pepper’s broke. Maybe he was telling the truth about his gambling woes. A loud sigh on the other end. Clack-clack of Wendy’s fake fingernails on the desk, and then she asks what he’s doing right now.

“Thinking about my mountain lion trap.”

“I told you, Rooster. You can be so...thick. There aren’t any mountain lions in Iowa.”

“Used to be.”

“There used to be buffalo, too. Where have all the buffalo gone?”

“Migrated west.”

“Maybe we oughta migrate west.”

“All in due time,” says Rooster.

CHAPTER 24

Grandfather clock, few hundred at a pawn shop, but bulky and fragile—hard to move. Record player, an old boxy thing you'd have to pay someone to take off your hands. Less than worthless. Jazz records, 45s, Ellington and Davis and Coltrane, but they're scratched up and probably next to worthless. While Hank's in the barn working on their station wagon, Eden's mind reverts to assessment mode, inventorying items around the farmhouse and speculating on their worth. Some of Sid's serial killer classical music in the record collection too, covers adorned with old white guys wearing wigs. Leaning up against the front door: 12 gauge pump shotgun, Mossberg. Big dumb lock on it, but those can be pried off. Easy to transport, a desirable product around deer hunting season, though in June it'd still fetch a couple hundred bucks.

She'd rather have cash. First she searches Hank's bedroom, since that's where most people hide things. All she finds is a gold wedding band, which lacks the weight of solid gold—only plated or, at best, some diluted alloy. Sid's room takes about three seconds to rifle through because all he has is a mattress. No nightstand or lamp or dresser, just some clothes, military pants and white t-shirts patchy with oil and grease, strewn from the bed to the closet, which is also empty.

Downstairs. Couch and chair. Behind Hank's military shadow box. Fridge. Freezer, where she finds a bottle of vodka. Looks like it might be expensive stuff, even has MADE IN RUSSIA running along the label, but an inch of frost covers the bottle's neck. It's been back behind the ice cubes and frozen vegetables for a month of Sundays.

By the time someone misses it, she'll be long gone. She makes a screwdriver, one part orange juice, two parts vodka.

Next it's the pantry, under the sink, even the drawer under the stove. She stands on a chair and feels the space between cupboards and ceiling. Then another screwdriver, same liquor to mixer ratio.

The basement, unfinished, five feet of clearance, offers limited options: a dusty, three-legged hutch with tiny, empty drawers, a few flattened cardboard boxes, a container of MREs, and the gun cabinet. Eden hunches under exposed steel I-beams, inspecting the cabinet's padlock. Thick. Numerical dial. She gives a few twists and frowns, her head a little dizzy from the booze, before heading back upstairs.

Coming down the hallway, Eden notices the bookshelf again. It's mostly poetry collections and pulpy novels, too thin to conceal much of anything, but she leafs through them anyway. Nothing. The military books, again nothing. She pulls out the big Family Bible, the only book with any substance. Why not? It weighs more than a cinder block. But...something rattles within. She discovers a hollowed-out spot between Psalms and the Epistles, packed with hundred after hundred, crisp bills that still give off a fresh scent.

Jackpot.

As she's counting the money, running total nearing five thousand dollars, floorboards creak in the kitchen. A handful of bills slip and butterfly to her feet. She scrambles to retrieve the fallen hundreds and the Bible drops, a loud thump that echoes throughout the farmhouse. She tries shoving the money back into the cut-out space.

"Hank, I didn't mean to—"

A calico cat tiptoes out of the kitchen. Orange, white, and dark brown fur. Mangled ear. The cat meows, whiskers wriggling, observing Eden without stopping, and heads for the open back door.

Her knees wobble. She shakes her head. Just a farm cat. No Hank. She puts the money away and reorganizes the bookshelf—no point in stealing anything yet. Not until they're closer to leaving.

Once upon a time she lived a life of petty crime with Zeke. Somehow, with all the stealing and pawning and troublemaking, they never got caught. Most of their friends and family did—Zeke's stepbrother has a twenty-year lease on an eight-by-eight apartment in Newton Correctional Facility. Stolen goods, illegal handgun, and a slew of other charges.

No. Don't have to return to any of that. They can go wherever they want. No need to bug her sister, who will put them up but only after a longwinded told-you-so tirade, overbearingly judgmental in a way no one save an older sister can be.

A cigarette. It's difficult to say no. She tells herself she didn't send Bobby off just so she could ransack the house and smoke. Feels like a lie. Is a lie. Grabbing the pack and a lighter, she heads out the back door. Now that she's a mom, cigarettes are a true guilty pleasure. Meaning, she understands the oxymoronic phrase, that what good is pleasure when it racks you with guilt?

In junior high, she'd been caught cheating on a social studies quiz. It wasn't worth much grade-wise, but she hadn't been reading the textbook and felt embarrassed at her complete lack of knowledge. Each question taunted her. When her dad found out, he didn't ground her or threaten her or roll his eyes like he so often did. He sat in his recliner

and said, “Getting caught was the best thing that could’ve happened. There are always consequences. Even in the Wild West, when it was lawless and uncivilized, there were consequences.” But Eden wonders if cheating in school is like cigarette-smoking: you only feel guilty about it because society hammers home how wrong it is.

No-see-ums tickle Eden’s neck. The sun burns her arms. Humid again, air so thick you could sign your name in it. Shady crop of trees east of the pasture offers minor relief. Her pink tank top is stiff from drying outside, cotton clinging to her skin. Cargo shorts sag on her hips, so she tightens the drawstring and reties the bow. What little pooch lingering since she gave birth disappeared this week. She chalks it up to stress. Her body, consuming itself. She stabs the cigarette between her lips but doesn’t light it. Nibbles on the filter, savoring the anticipation. Guilty pleasure. She hasn’t heard that phrase since her trip to Des Moines.

CHAPTER 25

He takes the blue bike. It's been a while—high school, he figures. Trekking along the Iowa River to keggers in the woods. That sort of thing. When he peels out of the gas station, loose gravel ricochets off the skid plate, pinging the vending machine behind him. Fritz awakens and yells something, swearing with limited enthusiasm. Makes a few idle threats.

Must be *his* bike.

Sid stirrups his feet on the pegs and heads down Main Street, his truck—Kyle and Bobby inside—disappeared. First gear wiggles, the Yamaha's tires better suited for a dirt track than asphalt. He accelerates like a rookie, way too fast, the jolt nearly unseating him. His heart surges with fear and excitement. Lowering his center of gravity, he feels uneven tremors between his thighs. Bike hasn't been maintained worth a damn. Pulls to the right. Gears click as he cycles up: throttle, clutch, shifter.

Trying to reconfigure his driving habits to the bike is tough. The Yamaha weighs maybe half what he does; it's basically a 250 horsepower bicycle. He's used to wrecking those big slugs on the derby track or hauling heavy loads in his truck.

The road curls left up ahead. Accelerating into the curve, he passes a station wagon, the driver of which honks a triple blast while brakes screech. Barbershop and pharmacy, more businesses up ahead. Few parked cars; no F-150. Sid's guts tie into a pretzel as pulls back the reins way too hard and nearly lays down the bike. He scans left and right. A woman waters red and yellow flowers in the pharmacy's windowsill. The barber matadors a towel around an old man, raising the chair with a few foot pumps.

Then, a flash of tailgate down a back alley. Easing to a stop—Kyle's not as dumb as he looks. Thinks he lost Sid and now he's laying low, making phone calls, waiting for reinforcements—Rooster or that big Army vet from the bar, Amos Attridge—to arrive. Kidnapping in the first place, though. *That* was dumb. Kyle took things too far. Even if he'd made it out of his small town, joined up like Sid, he'd've been drummed out in basic or during his technical training. Sid watched dozens just like him come and go. Guys a lot like this dirt bike: fast and loud and easily spun out of control. They'd mouth off and refuse to back down. But every man backs down eventually, to someone or something. Sooner you learn that, the better.

Sid uses his foot to kick around, aiming the dirt bike down the alley. Wood fences and backyard clotheslines tick by. Trash barrels with their bellies rusted out. Plastic bags zip into the air like kites; Sid brushes a Wal-Mart bag away, nearly losing control of the bike. Thing's fidgety. He accelerates anyway, galloping forward. Just before he reaches the truck, Kyle eyes him in the side mirror and burns out.

Sid follows him through alleyways that lead to the edge of town. Can't exactly run the F-150 off the road in this little blue bike. Speedometer maxes out at seventy-five. If Kyle gets the truck on the open road, Sid won't be able to keep up. Maybe he can get close enough and hop in the bed, use the .38 to smash through the back window.

But as they near Comstock's outer limits, red lights flare. The F-150 gasps to a stop next to someone's driveway. Sunshine diamond-sparkles off a puddle in the gravel shoulder. Only a few houses out this far, dilapidated clapboards with unmanicured yards, and no one runs out to see what all the fuss is about. A cornfield sits along the

demarcated zone, showing where town ends and country begins. Farther out, smoke from the meat packing plant billows. Sid hustles alongside and leaps off the bike, one hand reaching for the driver's door and the other fist cocked back, ready to...

Kyle's incapacitated. Bloody nose, chin, ears, blood on the steering wheel column. Face already purpling and swelling. No seatbelt. Underneath him, lying across the floorboard, Bobby. Hand on the brake. Sid throws the gear shifter up to P and yanks a moaning, groaning Kyle out of the truck.

Sid's adrenaline spikes, but it feels different than the moment leading up to derby. There's a certain lack of control. Even with all the hitting, you are behind the wheel when you derby. This time, holding Kyle by the scruff of his neck, Sid's movements feel automatic. Primeval. Hardwired. His brain, singularly focused, an arrow twanged and headed for the bull's-eye, shouts *what if Kyle is the guy?*

"Was it you?" he barks. He considers all the ways to make Kyle hurt. Thumbs in eye sockets, pulled back fingers, stomped balls. The gun he pocketed.

"Huh?"

"Were you driving the Trans Am?"

Kyle's eyes are spiderwebbed with red lines. A tear runs down his cheek. "I don't know what you're talking about, man..."

From the distance, a siren wails. Sid winces, jarred back into the present. Of course it wasn't this kid—he'd've been too young to drive back then. A learner's permit, maybe, but not a full license.

The siren gets louder and Sid hops back in the truck. The gas jockey must've called it in, or maybe an onlooker from Dollar Saver across the street. Doesn't much matter who at this point. He just beat up some local kids, stole a gun, stole a dirt bike. There will be questions. Trouble. He'd like to avoid both. Plus time spent in an interrogation room is time Rooster and Amos have to drive up here, wait for them outside the cop shop.

Kyle's gone already, run off into the nearby cornfield, no doubt as wary of the cops as Sid. Left the dirt bike. Sid rubs blood off the steering wheel with his shirttail and whips the truck around. Back they go up the side road, Elm or Maple or some tree name, angling for the other side of town. They get back on Main Street and that's the problem with small towns: nowhere to hide.

A cruiser comes around the corner, nestles in his rear-view. White with a seven-point gold star painted on its hood.

"Don't follow, don't follow..."

It hesitates. For a brief moment, frozen in time, Sid thinks they're in the clear. Then a siren chirps, tires squeal. The cruiser follows.

"Dammit," says Sid, and they race through Comstock, past the gas station and the ice cream shop. He blows a four-way intersection, jerry cans sliding back against the tailgate. Main Street transitions into 320th as they leave town. The cruiser pauses at the stop sign just enough for Sid to gain some distance. Guy probably grabbed his plates already; if not, they're on his dash cam. The truck's registered back in Iowa Falls, but there's a slim chance the cops know Sid hangs out at Hank's farm whenever he's in town.

The cruiser's a black-and-white Ford Taurus, late 90s model, slower than the newer Impalas and Chargers. Even so, Sid can't figure outrunning him for long. Not in his F-150.

Up ahead, a train cuts east to west, whistling loudly as it approaches the crossing. Perfect timing. Sid reflexively guns it. The F-150's automatic transmission hiccups entering a new gear. Cornfields on either side of them become a blurry green streak.

As the truck heaves forward, Bobby, catching on, loses his smile. His eyes turn wet. They're about a hundred yards out and the arms are lowered. The train's longer than the one they saw earlier, caboose barely visible, curling on the horizon like long dark claw.

"This is fast," says Bobby.

"This is nothing, kid. Buckle up."

"Slow down, please..."

"In a minute," says Sid. Just as soon as they're clear.

Seventy-five yards.

The speedometer needle fidgets around ninety miles per hour. The train's curving hard now as it barrels toward the crossing. The conductor unleashes a stream of whistles, each longer and louder than the last. Behind them, the cruiser pursues, but he's falling back. Doesn't think Sid has the guts. Calling his bluff.

Half a football field.

"Sid!"

Bobby dives for the brake, but Sid's ready for it and stiff-arms him.

“Hold on...”

The police cruiser twists sideways at the ten-yard line, rubber peeling off its tires. Bobby wails an ear-piercing shriek. Sid crashes through the crossing, snapping both candy cane-striped arms in half. Feels like his heart is lodged in his throat. Feels like time freezes for an instant, then speeds up. The locomotive roars behind them, still whistling, while on the other side of the tracks the cruiser blasts through different siren effects, the sounds of which are mostly lost as train cars swish by. Bobby squeezes his eyes shut. Sid keeps driving.

CHAPTER 26

Back in those meth-filled days, Eden rode solo to Des Moines for a weekend bender. Zeke was in county lockup, opting for a thirty-day stay rather than paying DUI fines. Zeke was the only man she'd ever been with, and she'd be twenty-five before the year was out. No engagement talk had commenced, for which she was part grateful and part spiteful. On one hand she didn't want to be with Zeke forever; on the other hand, that he felt the same way was a bit of a slight. That night she sought excitement, newness. Used her rainy day savings to get a honeymoon suite, one with a hot tub and king-sized bed and more channels than you could flip through in a half hour.

And that dress she borrowed from Shelby. Called it a ten count dress. Total knockout. Showed just enough cleavage, leg, back—just enough *skin* to tantalize without looking...well, like she was a small town girl seeking attention in the big city. The dress looked better on Eden, not that Shelby would ever admit it.

It was a wine-colored lace dress with sequins, a back scoop neckline, and a partial lined, scalloped edge that ended near just below a mole on her left thigh. Although the tag said polyester blend, the dress's material felt expensive, sequins more durable than those plasticky things on cheap prom gowns. The shoes—plain black pumps with tiny, pre-knotted bows over the toe area—were her own.

When she first arrived at the hotel she lifted a plastic spoon from the breakfast nook. A beauty cheat: by holding the spoon underneath her bottom eyelashes, she could spread a much thicker coat without blackening the skin under her eyes. For shadow, she liked violet for the way it complemented her green eyes. Spritzing herself with a Chanel

No. 5 sample tube, Eden moved to the suite's lone window. The last time she got this dressed up? Heritage prom. She went with Zeke, who bailed halfway through to go get high.

Old memories. Tonight they'd be left behind. She pulled back the curtains, smiling at the sea of lights—something you'd never see in Heritage past nine-thirty at night. A block up the street, a couple men walked into a sports bar called The Good Ol' Days.

Sure.

Inside the bar, widescreens covered the walls. Forty or fifty people—about 90% men—huddled around tables or sat at the bar. Glasses clinked. Someone in the back roared with laughter. Slowly it dawned on Eden that finding a seat without a viewing angle was impossible. Sunday football analysts debated tomorrow's games. Eden thought of Zeke in his La-Z-Boy, watching hours upon hours of Sunday afternoon football. And then Monday night, Thursday night, and college games on Saturday. The TV gave her a headache, so she ordered the strongest drink she knew, a Long Island Iced Tea.

Before long a man sitting at the bar noticed that she was by herself. He wore a charcoal suit, a loosened tie with a fat knot. They made eye contact on and off for the better part of an hour, and when he finally came over she'd already made her decision. And she wouldn't even be a sneak about it. She'd tell Zeke face-to-face when he finished his sentence.

Man went by Jeffery. Didn't give his last name, so neither did she. He smelled like expensive cologne. Teeth, white and straight. Princeton haircut. Looked to be

roughly her age, if anything a tad younger, and in good shape. Like his suit was tailored for him. They talked for a few minutes about the bar, how loud and obnoxious all the other patrons were, how The Good Ol' Days was an awful name, but, as Jeffery told her, it was a five minute walk from his condo and he just wanted to talk to someone, *anyone*, about something, *anything* other than work.

“What do you do?” she asked. “Oh—sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said, reaching in and trailing a finger down her shoulder. “I’m an investment banker. Today was a pretty good day, so me and a few friends came down here to celebrate. We’re sort of slumming it, to tell you the truth. Sort of my guilty pleasure.”

“Guilty pleasure?”

“Yeah. You know. I hit the sports bars up pretty hard in undergrad, but who has time for that now? But it feels good to be out here, in a way. You know what I mean.”

After high school Eden considered a culinary arts degree at Indian Hills; she liked to cook. But back then, the number one priority in Heritage was *carpe diem*ing: parties and getting high. She figured she could work her way into the kitchen by way of waitressing, making a little spending cash along the way. Enjoy her youth instead of pausing it for classrooms and studying.

“I’m a waitress,” she blurted out. “Goldschmidt’s Café.”

Jeffrey said, “Is that in East Village? Sounds familiar.”

“No.” She stood abruptly. The Long Island Iced Tea had gone to her head; blood rushed top to bottom, dizzying her vision.

Over by the bar, Jeffrey's friends gave her a puzzled look. But more than that, it was a look of pity. They felt sorry for her. Slumming it, that was what Jeffrey said. She was trailer trash, uncouth yet attractive enough, a story to tell on Monday morning when everyone in the office asked how each other's weekend went.

Or would it be worse if her disguise had worked, that she'd blended in successfully for one drunken night, while in her heart never being able to leave Heritage behind? The entire weekend was about getting out of small-town Iowa and finding something better. But what if Heritage was as good as it would get for her? What if she couldn't do any better than the itty bitty town she'd grown up in? That was a thing she never considered.

So she did what was expected of her: fled back to her suite, used the lamp's lightbulb to smoke half her stash, downed a bottle of wine to level her out, and left not long after sunrise.

Maybe a few miles south of Des Moines, cruising along I-35, a bad taste in her mouth from the sports bar encounter and various substances, Eden shook her head as the sky broke down, weeping tears by the spoonful. Sunday traffic was light, though, and she wanted to be home. Des Moines was like a glance at what could be. Someday, she thought, she'd shake the dust and make the move. Just go. Omaha, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Chicago, St. Louis. Find an efficiency apartment, work anywhere. Wander downtown, dwarfed by skyscrapers. Learn to be big city.

Or she could follow in her sister's footsteps and head west. Or maybe east. She felt dizzy again. Directionless.

The windshield wipers moaned. Dark clouds ruffled the horizon. How did things end up this way? You get into someone's car thinking it's just a ride. But then years later you still haven't gotten out, not in your mind, anyway. Eden sighed. Speed slowly increased, 65, 70, 75, 80. She looked back toward the interstate. Brake lights shone through the mist.

*

Eden plants herself in the grass, wishing away old memories. Maybe worst of all was how the accident brought her and Zeke together; if not for that, they might have separated. Her life could be completely different. But that's too nice a thought to entertain for long—she figures she'd've messed it up some other way. The idea to cheat on Zeke had not surfaced all at once; it had arisen slowly, methodically, each day another tangible, emotional distance from the man she lived with.

A crow caw-caws from a nearby bur oak. The tree's half rotted, bark peeling from its trunk like a snake shedding its skin. Eden fires up her menthol.

“Just don't burn down my woods,” booms a voice behind her. Hank.

She flinches, almost putting out her cigarette and hiding it. “Sorry.”

“You should be careful—I saw a coyote out here the other day. Might've been rabid.”

“They're scared of fire, right?” She holds up her lighter, strikes it.

“Funny.” He takes a seat beside her. His hands are cracked and bleeding, his knuckles oil-stained. An acrid smell hits Eden's nose: campfire smoke, but more pungent.

He's been welding. He settles his big elbows on his big knees and says, "Car's nearly ready. Tonight, if Sid gets back soon. Just one or two things I need him to help me with."

"Oh, okay."

"He likes you, you know."

"Huh?"

"Sid."

"Oh, I just..." Eden feels her neck burning up. This conversation feels middle school, *my friend said he likes you*, that sort of thing. Anyway, the last thing she needs right now is romance. "I'm pretty sure he still wants to get back together with his ex."

Hank's eyebrows jump. "What makes you say that?"

"Just the way he talked about her the other day. I mean, they got a kid together. I know that whole song and dance. She live around here?"

"So he didn't tell you." Hank sighs. "She passed away. Their daughter too. Car accident."

The cigarette between Eden's fingers burns to ashes. She lights another and takes a long, hard drag. "Hell."

"Pretty much."

"I guess that's why he's on edge all the time."

Hank shakes his head. "He was always that way, ever since his first deployment. That first one's a life-changer, especially for some twenty-year-old kid who only enlisted to get out of Iowa Falls. Things you see over there are hard enough, but then you *do*

things that make you question right and wrong, good and evil. I've seen a hundred men who couldn't handle it."

"PTSD?"

"No, what I'm talking about isn't a medical diagnosis. It's a spiritual thing. Or a human thing, if you prefer. War is the opposite of humanity. Seeing it up close, where you can't change the channel or even look away, that's a tough pill to swallow, a memory no one can shake, Sid included."

"Maybe so. Still, losing his family..."

Hank finishes her thought. "It seems contradictory, I admit. He says my theory's all a bunch of spiritual mumbo jumbo. Says he's just a regular guy."

A white mushroom cloud forms out of Eden's exhalations. She brushes the smoke away and jabs her cigarette through spears of grass, down into the dirt. Out in the trees, woodpeckers jackhammer away, the sound not unlike the tattoo needle she watched Zeke sit under for an hour and a half. Homemade skull and crossbones across his upper back. He was seventeen years old. At exactly what age, wonders Eden, do little boys turn into the men that screw this world up?

CHAPTER 27

Sid's ears hurt from the train noise. He gets off 115 and gravel travels the first chance he gets, taking the long way home, but when they come upon a long stretch of green, no houses or farm buildings in sight, he pulls over and tells Bobby he has to take a leak.

Behind an elm tree, hands shaky, he thumbs the cylinder latch and checks the pistol: five rounds chambered, fully loaded. The hammer's hacksawed off—kiss a quick-draw goodbye if your gun gets hooked in your pants pocket or on your shirttail. It has a nice rosewood grip, but there's a crack where it curves into the trigger guard. Been tossed around its whole life.

Jar flies ree-ree-ree from the meadow. White noise. A whippoorwill clears her throat. Sid works the cylinder back into place and gives it a spin, sights down the barrel, hands steady now. A gun is an angry finger, the ultimate j'accuse. A gun points and says: you are the one. Great tool for singling people out, forcing an issue.

"Bobby," he says, coming around the elm, "come out here."

"I can hold it," says Bobby.

"No, it's not that. I want you to do something."

Bobby opens the door and slides down. He walks over, unassuming.

"Do you know what this is?"

"A gun."

".38 Special, Smith and Wesson." Sid kneels down, eye-level with the boy.

"Some bad people are looking for us. All of us, from the sound of it. Your mom, you, me,

probably Hank too.” He hands Bobby the pistol. With the trigger pull weight about a dozen pounds, Sid doesn’t worry about an accidental discharge. Could drop the gun, throw it against a wall. Wouldn’t go off. It’ll probably take Bobby both hands and both trigger fingers to apply adequate pressure.

“You need to learn how to protect your family,” Sid tells him. “My dad and uncle took me skeet shooting when I was eight. Maybe younger than you when I shot my first rabbit.”

Bobby nods, his attention devoted to the pistol in his hands. “I get to keep it?”

“Not just yet.”

The pistol’s double-action, but with the hammer missing it can only be fired by squeezing the trigger back all the way. You’d be lucky to have anything tighter than a Big Dipper grouping from more than ten paces. Regardless, every bullet needs a target. Sid snags a milk jug from the back of the cab and suspends it from a tree branch with two zip ties. It dangles about twenty-five feet from where they stand.

“Cross your thumbs,” says Sid. “You cross your thumbs for better control. That way the pistol doesn’t come back and bite you.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Sid covers Bobby’s ears with his palms, makeshift hearing protection, and steadies himself, grimacing as the boy lines up the pistol. He remembers, years and years ago, how his pellet gun ripped out that rabbit’s throat and left a rose petal in its place.

Helluva shot, his dad said, and told little Sid not to fret, for the rabbit had surely been gnawing on their garden as of late. “That’s the way it’s done out here,” said his dad, and that day Sid felt the weightlessness of childhood removed, replaced at once with something gaudier, misshapen, and adherent.

Late afternoon sunlight cuts through the forest and paints a camouflage shadow across Bobby’s concentrating face. The barrel waves as though following a drunk bumblebee. The milk jug sways. Suddenly Sid’s heart feels like it’s filling with air and bursting over and over again and he reaches out and snatches the gun away.

“Hey,” says Bobby. “What—”

Sid shoves the pistol into his pocket and picks Bobby up—kid’s heavier than he looks—and stomps to the truck, places Bobby inside, and when he shuts the door the face reflected off the passenger window is the face of a stranger. Long hair and scared, wild eyes. Where did you go? he asks himself. A full minute before he’s calmed down.

He climbs in the truck. “Bobby, I’m gonna drop you off at the farm. Then I gotta go take care of some stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“Stuff.”

“Then you’ll come back?”

Sid hesitates. “Of course I will.”

Bobby smiles.

CHAPTER 28

“Wore and Piece stopped having quarter days. Every Thursday, clothing was marked down to twenty-five cents. People lined the sidewalk waiting for the sign on the door to get flipped. Some even brought their own carts, since WP only has a few rickety grocery store toss-outs. People filled those carts up faster than you could blink.

“See, everyone was buying all the quarter shirts, pants, shorts, hats, belts, ties, suspenders, sundresses, what-have-you, and selling them at their own garage sales over the weekend. Once Wore and Piece found out what was going on, they put a kibosh on quarter days.”

“These people, they made a profit?” asks Rooster.

Wendy smiles. She has catlike features: small, upturned nose, pointy ears, sleek body. Eyes, simultaneously active and dull, with low-hanging and thin eyebrows. Her lime green summer dress plunges where it should, the pendant of a thin gold-chain necklace disappearing into the mystery of her chest. “Some did. WP is donation only, and they get some good stuff. Clothes with the tags still on them. You always wonder why people throw away such perfectly good things.”

“No,” says Rooster, pulling the Lincoln Town Car onto Old Highway 6. “I don’t wonder.”

They drive north, out to the edge of town. It stands in sharp contrast to Heritage’s south end, which houses the landfill and the dive bars and two trailer parks. The north, conversely, like many towns, is more recently developed. Luxury homes, faux log cabins on pristine acreages, huddle around a large pond. Yards never get past a five o’ clock

shadow; mowing is farmed out. In the middle of the pond's pale blue waters, a fountain sprays water in the shape of a weeping willow tree. Residents include the town's dentist, the (absentee) mayor, sheet metal upper management, and the owner of the truss plant. Housing prices soar above the quarter million range, nearly three times the amount the average Heritage citizen can afford. Rooster's trailer, for example, cost twenty-five grand. He paid cash.

"Those are the people who throw away their unused stuff," remarks Wendy. "I always wanted to live there."

Rooster shakes his head. Around the property, which is known as Lake McCauslin (even though most would agree it's a pond) on account of the developer, young saplings sprout up in yardstick intervals. In a decade or so they'll bloom into a nice, natural privacy fence. But it'll look fake. Trees are for woods; woods are for hunting and trapping. Ponds are for fishing but it's probably only stocked with a few grass carp, keeping the algae at bay. Best case scenario, catch-and-release.

Rooster says, "I used to wanna live out here. Lost the urge. These people, they were born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Couldn't be us anymore than we could be them."

But even during his harangue Rooster feels his neck glowing. The Town Car's brand new, a purchase he hoped would make him look like a businessman and not a drug dealer. He aspires to be known as a "car enthusiast," a moniker about as disingenuous as dubbing the half-acre pond Lake McCauslin.

"I miss my Camaro," he says, meaning to only think it.

“Me too,” says Wendy. “That car had balls.”

They pull into Heritage Health Care Center, a retirement center to which Rooster donates a healthy sum once a month. The parking lot’s full of vehicles with wheelchair-emblem license plates and handicapped placards on rear-view mirrors. As Rooster parks the town car, his cell phone buzzes, rattling loose change and paper clips in the center console. A pithy text from Amos. Must be hard to text with those baseball-mitt-sized hands. *Here.*

Out front, hummingbirds spear a Cool Whip container suspended on a sugar maple branch. Must be filled with sugar water, the container. The little birds dart to and fro, wings a blur, their helicopter thrum drowned out by a six-pack of AC units, boxy and bug-covered, which groan steadily, hemmed in by pygmy bushes whose usual burgundy red flowers have wilted from heat and lack of sufficient water. The branches look as crisp as Wendy’s hair—she uses half a bottle of Aqua Net solidifying her thick, permed mane. Fake tan, caramel color. Smells cotton fresh. She’s mid-twenties, that in-between stage of drug abuse where you actually look pretty damn good.

“She expecting me?” asks Wendy.

“Sure,” says Rooster, eating an apple fritter. It’s hot out and his lower back pools with sweat. Wendy somehow never sweats—if she did her overproduced hair might collapse. “Wait out front a minute.”

Pigeons flutter on top of the building, drop a curling feather. Rooster slinks around the corner, where Amos awaits. Something different about the big man today...he

shaved, Rooster realizes. A better look for him. The goatee always had food particles stuck in it. Disgusting. Amos lights a cigarette off his still-glowing stub.

“Smoking again?”

“Ultra lights.”

“More chemicals than tobacco...still, I guess that’s a step up,” says Rooster, handing Amos his .357. “What’d those two burnouts say?”

Amos smirks, the gesture odd due to his sudden lack of facial hair. His mouth movement looks exaggerated. He tucks the bulky handgun into his belt and says, “Not much. Claimed the cops came in and busted things up just as they were about to nab the kid.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Oh, and the Sid guy is looking for some car. Trans Am.”

“Huh,” says Rooster, gnawing on his lower lip. “Trans Am?”

Amos rolls his fat fingers across the pistol and says, “Don’t worry. He shows up, I’ll take care of things for good.”

“Just keep your eyes peeled,” says Rooster.

Out front, still in the parking lot, Wendy crosses her arms. She’s taller, standing on a concrete parking bumper that’s crumbled like stale cookies on both ends. Morsels scrape under her open-toed wedges as she hops down. “About time.”

“Just had to drop something off,” says Rooster.

The three-story brownstone building has elevators at both ends and two in the lobby: one for residents and guests and a service elevator used mainly for food and linen

distribution. Rooster and Wendy are buzzed in, more formality than security since the front desk clerk never bothers looking up from her Sudoku puzzle.

They brush by the wheelchair stable. In the hallway, a dry erase board announces in blue marker this week's movie night, a Cary Grant double feature: *His Girl Friday* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Two residents, both liver-spotted old men, play Ping-Pong in the rec room. They swear so violently even Rooster's ears burn, and an orderly admonishes their foul language. The orderly's just a kid, eighteen or nineteen. "You have to be respectful," he keeps saying, voice cracking, but the two men berate him, waving their paddles threateningly.

"Poor kid," whispers Wendy. Rooster just laughs.

Turning a corner, they pass a man wearing coveralls and a plain ball cap. He wheels a trash cart with squeaky casters. Rooster discards the remainder of his apple fritter into the half full cart, where it bounces off white trash bags and settles in the far corner.

"Much obliged," says Rooster, wiping crusted sugar off his lips.

The man doesn't respond.

As they turn the corner, Wendy says, "He was cute."

"Hey, you're here with me, remember?"

"You don't own me, Rooster. No one owns me."

Rooster rolls his eyes. He may as well own Wendy. She's hooked bad, snorts and smokes, next step needles. Meadow Gillespie told him how Wendy was shake-and-baking, producing her own meth by mixing ingredients in a milk jug or two-liter bottle.

This can be done right in your home. You probably have all the necessary ingredients lying around, in your bathroom closet or tool shed or under the kitchen sink. From Rooster's experience shake-and-baking is far from sustainable; just doesn't give you the same ride. Pure amateur hour. Before long you're hoarding any decent product you come across, and that has to last, so you slide a needle into the great saphenous vein of your calf or between your hallux and second toe, just once, you promise yourself while the demon wraps both arms around you and laughs. Looking her up and down, he thinks: what a pity.

“Sorry, baby,” he says, feigning remorse. Wendy smiles.

When they arrive at room 17A, Rooster lays a barber's knock on the door. Shave and a haircut, two bits. A muffled grunt issues from behind the door, which Rooster accepts as permission to enter. He puts one arm around Wendy and with his other arm swings the door open.

Rooster's mom sits on a charcoal-colored orthopedic chair, a recliner powered by a tethered remote. The back massager purrs. Daytime television drones. Her slippers are stacked directly below her socked feet. Her cropped bob hair, white and frizzy, hits just below her jawline, accentuating the high cheekbones she passed along to her only son.

“Who's this?” she asks. He forgot how donkey-like her voice sounds. At 67, she's a younger resident, not that you'd know by looking.

“Mom, I'd like you to meet my friend, Wendy.” Rooster gestures toward his mother. “Wendy, this is Yvonne.”

“Pleasure,” says Wendy.

“Pleasure’s all yours,” snaps Yvonne.

Rooster sighs. The view from out his mom’s window is mostly of an overgrown boxwood bush. Beyond that, since they’re on the back side of the building, a seven-foot-high wooden fence stretches across, obscuring the housing development. Rooster goes to the window and works out a smudge with his shirttail. “Wendy works at the bank, Mom.”

“I’m glad you’re making friends,” brays Yvonne, muting the TV. The closed captioning pops up, distracting Rooster. “Your father never let me have any friends, and now nobody comes to visit me.”

“We brought you donuts,” says Wendy, opening the box to reveal an assortment of fritters, crullers, jelly-filled, cake donuts—some iced, some glazed, some powdered—long johns, plain café, and Boston cream.

“Looks like you ate all the good ones,” says Yvonne, crinkling her age-spotted nose.

“There’s a dozen in there. We got our own donuts,” explains Rooster. Self-consciously he rubs his lips and chin.

“So you ate without me? You ate with your new friend. If I only had friends, they would come visit me, eat donuts with me. Your father never let me have any friends. He didn’t want me to find a job, even when he got cancer.”

“I know, Mom.”

Wendy waves a thumb at the open door and whispers, “I’m going to wait outside.”

Rooster begins a protest, but it's lost before the words form. Wendy made her appearance; what does it matter if she stays?

"Probably best," says Yvonne, taking advantage of her son's hesitation.

"You might get bored," says Rooster.

Wendy shrugs, a coy look about her. "Girl like me never gets bored for long. Maybe I'll run into the maintenance man."

Rooster grinds his teeth as the door eases shut. Out of guilt and social obligation he always stays a minimum of one hour. Even if they just sit there watching daytime television, he ensures each visit lasts at least an hour. Back when he first started collecting pseudoephedrine for his father, they'd drive to a different town—Osceola, West Des Moines, Ottumwa, Centerville—and Rooster would go from pharmacy to pharmacy buying small, legal amounts—called smurfing back then—until he'd accumulated enough to cook a distribution-sized batch. Usually took an hour, give or take. If Rooster could give his old man an hour back then, he can't deny his mom the same allotted time.

"You have something for me?" asks Yvonne once Wendy's footsteps trail down the hallway.

"Of course," says Rooster, and he digs the baggie—making sure to grab the right one—out of his pants pocket. A blend of his own discretion, but the active ingredient, so to speak, is baby aspirin, Equate brand, a low dose pain reliever ground up with the flat of a spoon on a wooden cutting board. Produces just enough of a burn to fool his mom.

Yvonne pinches her nose shut and squints. "Thank you, Joseph."

He ignores the slip of his old name and tells her about his mayoral aspirations and the mountain lion he hopes to kill.

“Mayor,” says Yvonne in a hee-haw voice. “That’s more likely than finding a mountain lion in Iowa.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Yvonne’s eyes glaze over. “Let me see your necklace.”

Slipping off the rooster’s foot necklace, he smiles. They didn’t have much when he was growing up, so one day after school Rooster snuck into the neighbor’s chicken coop and clubbed to death their dinner: an Iowa Blue. He dragged the cock home and his mom, shocked at first, helped him bleed, scald, pluck, and eviscerate the bird. They replaced its innards with red potatoes, baby carrots, and celery, all of which had been seasoned with rosemary and black pepper. His mom cooked cornbread stuffing, a double recipe. Rooster made brownies with all the black walnuts that fell off the backyard tree. He cracked the walnut shells with a hammer and dug their meat out with the smallest hex key he could find. It was a painstaking process. At eight o’ clock, they finally decided they should eat without the head of the household. “We’ll save a plate,” Yvonne promised. At ten o’clock Rooster realized his father wouldn’t be coming home. At midnight he fell asleep crying, but not before realizing he’d have to earn his father’s attention some other way. Rooster was twelve years old.

Yvonne inspects the necklace like she’s seeing it anew. “Such mastery,” she says. The foot, scaly-skinned, webbed and clawed, twists in front of her face as she wets a gnarled finger and dips it into the powder.

*

After their visit concludes, Rooster kisses Yvonne's forehead and promises he'll see her next week. Walking down the hall, he scans entryways for Wendy, whom he's thinking about ditching here. If she experiences what it is to be old and alone, she might stop hurtling that direction at such breakneck speed.

His mind preoccupied with such thoughts, Rooster is shoved into a maintenance closet before he realizes what's happening. The perpetrator seems somewhat familiar; the guy in coveralls and a nondescript hat that drew Wendy's attention upon him.

"Hey, jackass," Rooster says, but stops talking abruptly when he feels the blunt poke of a .38 revolver in his gut.

The maintenance man closes the closet door behind them without looking away from Rooster. The closet reeks of ammonia and faux lemon, cleaning supplies. When the man pulls the ceiling light's drawstring, everything's illuminated.

"Sid Rivers. You're a hard man to find."

"Not hard enough," says Sid, removing his hat. His black hair remains matted, pressed down on his head. His eyes have that up-all-night weariness. Dark skin, but not an Indian. Probably not. Maybe not. Rooster's tall, but this guy isn't giving up much in the height department, and he's a little more solid than Rooster.

"How'd you find me?"

"Stopped by the café for some pie."

Goldie. Just like him to blab about Rooster's Thursday morning schedule. "And then they just let you in the front door here?"

“Not exactly Fort Knox,” says Sid, shrugging, the small revolver waist-level.

“Rooster, right? What kind of name is that?”

Rooster smirks. “I see you brought your cannon with you.”

“It’ll do the trick, especially at this range. Ever see someone get belly shot? Got the spleen, liver, kidneys all clustered in around there nice and tight. Infection rate triples for stomach wounds.”

“Is that from a textbook? Maybe we can head outside and pick up my pistol. You showed me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

“No thanks.”

Rooster swirls his tongue around his dry mouth. “You wouldn’t stand between a man and his family, right?”

“The hell you talking about?”

“Heh,” says Rooster. He licks his lips. “The boy you stole—he’s mine. I know, I know. Didn’t believe it myself at first. But the timeline adds up. Ask the woman. The mother. She may deny it, but if you press her, she’ll tell the truth.”

“That’s what you want to do, huh? Press her?”

Rooster breathes in and out through his nose. “Cops are looking for you. Think maybe you had something to do with Zeke Hartz being dead. I mean, you did steal his wife, right? And *my* boy?”

“Not exactly how that played out.”

“That’s what every felon says when he’s cuffed and stuffed. Supposed to take your word for it? I know a few cops around here. On my way to making mayor.”

“Congrats.”

“Thanks. See, I can make a lot of your problems disappear.” Rooster snaps his fingers. “Problem solved.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Guy’s a real hard case. “How about this? Cash. Twenty-five thousand—” he pauses to read Sid’s reaction “—*fifty* thousand dollars. Take me to my trailer and it’s yours. In twenty minutes you can be on your way. Check out derbies somewhere else. Or try racing. Sprint cars, stock. Whatever. Hear you’re good on the track, balls of steel. You race?”

“Fifty grand, huh?”

“I’m a businessman—I prefer deals to violence.”

When Rooster starts to bend down, Sid jabs the gun into his solar plexus. Rooster chokes and tells Sid he’s just going for his sock money.

“Relax. Twenty-five hundred bucks. Some just-in-case money. Take it.”

Sid snatches Rooster’s sock money away, a roll of rubberbanded bills. He eyes the pile suspiciously.

“Might be a little light,” admits Rooster. But then, he doesn’t exactly have fifty grand lying around his trailer. If he can just get Sid outside, though, Amos will nab him from behind. “Tell me where they are and the rest of the money’s yours.”

“Why don’t you keep this,” says Sid, throwing the sock money back. “Should cover your funeral expenses.” He aims the .38 center mass, right at Rooster’s fast-beating heart. Ex-military, handled a weapon before. But the barrel trembles slightly.

“You’re no killer,” says Rooster, talking fast now, hoping he can say the right words, “and you don’t want money. So what, then? How about a Trans Am?”

Before he can blink, Sid is upon him, business end of the .38 wedged into his mouth. When you’re right, you’re right. Rooster’s tongue reflexively licks the barrel. The sour taste of gunpowder residue sickens him. He imagines a hole opening up behind his head. Entry wounds poke; exit wounds blossom. Then there’s the internal mess. A bullet zips through the cranium, shock wave rumbling throughout. If it exits with enough force, the entire skull will shatter like a dropped lightbulb.

But Sid doesn’t fire. Instead, he shoves Rooster back. “So you heard from those Comstock kids.”

“Yeah, but I can do you one better. I know where there’s a classic model, only one small problem. Got a few dents in the front bumper. Little fender bender back in the day.”

Sid gulps, but maintains his composure. “And you read a newspaper story, think you got it all figured. Think you can bluff your way out of this. Not today.”

The closet’s silent for a moment. Rooster can still taste metal. Outside, an announcement broadcasts over the PA system, but it mostly sounds like static from behind the closed door. A garbled voice says something about lunch and medication and Activities of Daily Living. Footsteps clop-clop up and down the hallway.

“You don’t sound too confident,” says Rooster.

“How about you tell me what it is you know,” says Sid, “before I blow your brains out?”

“I do that, Cochise, what leverage do I have?” Rooster wants to spit it out: the answer’s right in front of your nose, dummy! But he holds onto his ace. There’ll be another hand to play.

“Dogwood derby, tomorrow night,” says Sid, reaching back and placing a hand over the doorknob without looking away from Rooster. “You tell me what you know before you get them.”

Before he leaves, Sid promises to send the front desk clerk down to let Rooster out. Rooster hears the click of the lock, the faintness of Sid’s footsteps as they retreat, and then there’s silence. Rooster pockets his sock money and reaches up and pulls the light’s drawstring, darkening the room. A sliver of light glows underneath the door. Nothing to do now but wait. Tomorrow, meet Sid in Dogwood. Once he hears the whole story, he’ll be done protecting Eden. He’ll give up her location without blinking. Either that or they make him, because Rooster won’t be cornered in a closet this time, he’ll have...

“Amos,” says Rooster.

He digs a plastic bag the size of a matchbook out of his front pocket. The non-placebo meth. Plunging his nose into the open bag, he inhales deeply. Licks the plastic clean, then tosses the baggie off to the side and presses a foot back against the shelving unit. With a loud shout he propels himself through the closet door. The strike plate, adhered with two flimsy screws, skitters across the hall. Wood fibers toothpick around the waist-high gap in the door’s frame.

Lying on the floor, a pair of maintenance coveralls. A plain ball cap. Rooster growls. His forearm pulsates, a bright red gash near his elbow hinge, dangerously close to his ulnar artery. Another inch and he'd be in shock inside of ten minutes. He buffalo-charges the lobby, grimacing and holding his wound.

"Ready?" asks Wendy without looking up. She's holding last month's *Redbook* in her lap, the cover promising a handful of new and inventive ways to zap that belly fat.

Rooster glares at her. Blood spatters the tiled floor in coin-sized drops.

"Sheez! What happened?"

Tires squeal outside. Rooster smears blood across the door as he exits; across the parking lot, in the road, sunlight flashes. Amos lining up a shot. The F-150 roars, filling the air with diesel exhaust. Even in expert hands the .357 has a maximum effective range of fifty yards, anything beyond that wishful thinking, and the pickup's nearly two blocks away already. Nevertheless, Amos licks his lips and widens his stance.

"Stop!" shouts Rooster.

Too late. Amos fires all six rounds, pistol cough-cough-coughing in his hand, striking the tailgate once. A dull thud sends red-hot sparks sizzling off the pavement. The pickup shudders, then corrects and zooms away.

Rooster screams and runs to Amos, who stands in the middle of the road with a dopey grin. The pickup screeches around the tight curve that leads out of town. Sid's gone. Wendy's frightened shout issues behind Rooster but he ignores her, grabs the .357 and brings it sideways across Amos's chin. Drops the bigger man. Rooster kneels and lifts the pistol up and clubs Amos again and again. Warm blood oozes across his fingers.

Sprinkles the asphalt. Rooster can feel himself shouting, but he's unsure what. Something that ends on a question mark.

CHAPTER 29

“Une plante tardive,” says Hank.

Cirrostratus clouds halo the sun. Chimney swifts boomerang from farmhouse eaves, out to grab a bug and back again. The lonely cow brays in the pasture. Eden, swimming in a pair of Hank’s overalls, works on the garden. Hands ache. Knees ache. A bead of sweat drips off her nose and dots the fine brown soil. Her work clothes smell like sweat and onions fried in bacon grease. She focuses on the task at hand and not how incredibly pissed off she is.

The garden’s twenty-by-sixtyish feet, loaded with fruit and vegetables, a plot that keeps Hank fed most of the year, or so he claims. Tomatoes transition from green to orange and red, sagging but hovering off the ground. Herbs crowd each other at the far corner. Scallions poke up like long, thin fingers. Bell peppers, sweet peppers, hot peppers, golf-ball-sized strawberries, lettuce, and the leafy tops of potatoes that prompted Hank’s foreign-sounding phrase.

“Late-blooming plants,” he explains.

Bobby’s at the far corner, knees buried between rosemary and basil. He scoots his Hot Wheels Chevelle along, making putters and screeches and other such car noises.

“You can’t apologize for him,” says Eden. She shifts her weight, scraping dirt off a stone placard embossed with a proverb, first in Chinese or Japanese and then translated as HE WHO PLANTS A GARDEN PLANTS HAPPINESS.

“The secret to a good garden,” Hank continues, “is devoting as much time to pulling weeds as tending the plants.”

“Boys will be boys, I get it. You like fireworks, football, talking shit. It’s just— look, you can’t let my son get taken. You can’t put a gun in his hand.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you. What he did was wrong, but he meant well.”

“That’s not the—”

Bobby shouts, jolting Eden out of her anger momentarily. The boy looks up at Eden and Hank. “They crashed,” he says, holding up his red car. When he doesn’t get the response he wanted, he asks where Sid is.

“Probably bailed on us,” says Eden. Wouldn’t surprise her. In her experience, men will do anything they can to avoid domestic responsibilities. She worked with a divorced father of three, a man who’d lost his job at the truss plant following the marital split. After child support was taken from his check, he barely had enough money to eat and pay rent. He survived on Ramen noodles and undeclared tips. Once, when he came in and used the café’s restroom on his day off, he admitted that he could not afford toilet paper that week. Goldie asked: why not file for joint or partial custody? His reply was simple: “It’s easier this way.”

Hank asks if they want a salad for dinner. Garden-style.

“I dunno. We should get going.” Thursday already. Eden shakes her head, angry at Sid’s irresponsibility, angry that Hank hasn’t gotten around to fixing the Subaru. She’s feeling less like a guest and more like a hostage. “When is that—”

At that moment Sid’s F-150 pulls into the driveway, horn honking in sporadic bursts. Eden arises and pulls her overall strap back over her shoulder. She’s wearing her tank top underneath, no bra. Hank says something like, “Go easy on him,” but a hot anger

blurs her mind. She brushes dirt off her palms and tunnel-visions her way to the front yard, where Sid is still in the truck, laying on the horn. Rightfully so. If he steps out, she'll deck him. Might not hurt him all that much, but she knows how to put her weight into a punch, to aim right between the eyes and lean through it.

“All right,” she says, opening the door, cocking her fist.

Blood stains the front seat, a red waterfall from Sid's left leg to the running board. His face is pale, lips dry and cracked, skin peeling like wilted flowers. The seat recliner lever is broken in half, a metal, splintered stub. His pant leg, rust-colored from pocket to cuff. When he tries to speak he faints.

*

It isn't easy getting Sid into the house. He deadweights them most of the way, resurging only long enough to say, “No cops.” He waves his hands, flagging down Eden as she tries dialing 911 on the house phone.

She frowns. Reluctantly hangs up. He's only half lucid, lost a lotta blood. Could pass out at any minute, and from the looks of things he might not wake up again. “Why the hell not?”

Hank spreads a sheet on the kitchen table. “For me.”

“What do you mean?”

But Hank merely shrugs. Eden ushers Bobby upstairs to the bedroom, carrying him awkwardly. She nearly battering-rams his head against the doorjamb. “Play with your toy car.”

“It's broken,” says Bobby.

When she sets him down, he shoves the plastic pieces in her face.

“See?”

The curtains are drawn, so she flips on the light and humors him by inspecting the car. Both front wheels have snapped off. Pebbles or sand or broken parts click inside the compartment. The ass end is covered in dried mud.

“I’ll help you fix it later,” she promises, racing back downstairs.

From the kitchen, the sound of fabric being ripped. Hank runs a pair of scissors up Sid’s pant leg, shearing the denim from leg to groin. Sid’s recumbent on the table, a dark red circle the size of a keyhole on his thigh, just below his boxers. Blood swirled around his wound has hardened. Eden flinches, moving a hand to cover her mouth.

“What happened?”

“Ricochet,” says Sid, shrugging off his jacket. He’s been economic with words since Eden met him, but his short clips of speech, paired with labored breathing, scare her. Why not just go to the hospital? And who shot him? She takes note of his arm scars again, resisting the urge to assault him with questions even though they’re piling up by the second.

Hank pulls the bottle of vodka from the freezer. He twists the lid off the bottle and sprinkles the bullet wound. Sid cries out when the booze hits his thigh, his leg tensing, foot stretched out and toes pointing toward the kitchen entryway.

“You want it to get infected?” asks Hank. His eyes dart to Eden. “Bullet’s still inside.”

Sid grabs the bottle and tosses a swig back, followed by a hacking cough.

“Eden,” says Hank. “Bring me the knives.”

“Which one?”

“Just bring the block over here.”

She retrieves the wooden set of knives from the kitchen counter. It’s a seven piece set, six blades and a sharpener. After planting the block on the table, she fetches some washcloths from the linen closet.

“Probably a good idea,” says Hank, cranking up the stove’s back burner. Hiss, pop, blue flames. He turns to Sid. “Went in sideways and only hit meat, which is good for you. Except it’s still in there.”

“How can you tell?” asks Eden.

Using the chef’s knife, Hank points to a fleshy spot just above Sid’s kneecap. Sure enough, there’s a slug-sized lump. The stove’s burner crackles. Eden can feel the heat from five feet away.

“Do you have anything for the pain?” she asks.

Hank grabs the knife sharpener. “Bite down on this,” he instructs Sid.

“I meant more like medication. Anesthesia.”

“Nothing stronger than headache pills. Thin the blood, though. Don’t worry,” says Hank, laying the paring knife across the open flame, “I can do this. Like fishing a bolt out of an oil pan.” He holds the two knives together, blade to blade, over the burner. In a few seconds they glow red. He pantomimes withdrawing the bullet. “This was a ricochet? How do you know?”

“Went through the truck,” says Sid.

“Pistol, huh? Nice shooting. Bet he’d beat you at the range.”

As Sid harrumphs, Hank quickly slices a one-inch slit over the lodged bullet. The stink of scorched flesh and burnt hair fills the kitchen as Sid howls in pain. Hank pries first with the knives, but when he can’t quite nudge it out, he asks for Eden’s help.

“What can I do?”

“Spread out the incision while I dig.”

She places her palms on Sid’s leg. Warm blood trickles over her fingers. Sid hisses, quick breaths through his teeth, spit flying and catching Eden’s cheek.

“Almost...” says Hank. “I need something to grab it with.”

“Like what?” Eden pulls open drawers until she finds cluttered kitchen utensils: wooden spoons, spatulas, a can opener, potato masher, and...salad tongs. Those oughta do the trick.

“Perfect.” Hank digs the tongs into the incision. He clamps down and retracts; first comes the bullet and then a heap of blood.

Sid passes out, banging his head against the wooden table. Hank, still holding the tongs, draws the bullet up to the light fixture and regards it curiously.

Eden presses a washcloth over Sid’s injury. “What?”

“Funny-looking bullet...”

“Lemme see.”

He dumps it into her open palm. The bullet’s silvery and mangled, much what she expected. Size of a thimble. Hollow. Odd. She rinses blood off in the sink, a red spiral down the drain.

“It’s the seat lever,” she says.

“Like hell,” says Hank, running a piece of tape over the washcloth to hold it in place.

“It is. A chunk, anyway.”

“Huh.” Hank places the shrapnel in the dish strainer and checks Sid’s breathing.

“You got steady hands, Eden?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Good, you do the stitches. Don’t worry, it’s as easy as lacing your shoes. I’ll walk you through it.”

“Why can’t you just stitch him up?”

Hank holds out his trembling hands. “Delirium tremens.”

The DTs? Eden inadvertently stares at the vodka.

“Got it beat,” he says, picking up the bottle and sniffing. There is a brief drawing of nostalgia on his face, but it’s quickly erased by regret. “Cripes, that’s foul. Doesn’t it reek?”

She doesn’t know what to say to that. “I don’t understand how the lever...thingie got lodged inside him.”

“It’s just one of those things. One of those weird things. Seen my share of shrapnel wounds—once the firing starts you never know what’s gonna happen. Army chaplain killed by a roadside bomb right before I got out. I kept thinking that could’ve been me. Me, trying to save everyone, dead on the side of the road.”

After she washes her hands he gives her a sewing needle and unscented dental floss. The needle lies in a bowl half filled with vodka. She picks it up, shakes off the liquor, and runs the floss through the needle's eye. Thank God for Home Ec. She was awful with the sewing machine, a noisy Singer model older than their teacher, but took to the needle and thread without much trouble.

Hank removes the washcloth and inspects the wound he gave Sid. "Stopped bleeding," he observes. With a pair of tweezers he prods the wound. "Hope there aren't any good-sized metal fragments left inside."

"What if there are?"

"If his body doesn't push them out right away, could go septic. Infected blood. Could get gangrene, have to amputate his leg. Don't worry, you'll do fine. Start at the edge closest to you and work away."

She pokes the needle into his skin on one side of the incision. Gently. Checks out Sid to see if he reacts.

"The edge of the wound is numb," says Hank, "so you're not really hurting him. You have to get the needle deep or the suture will tear. Get into the subdermal. Under the skin."

"Okay, okay," she says, and plunges the needle in deeper. She angles it ninety degrees and threads it to the other side, pulling the dental floss that Hank holds for her. The floss whirls as it unspools. Sid doesn't flinch, his breathing deep and steady.

"Now run a diagonal path across," says Hank.

“Like lacing your shoes, huh?” Eden shakes her head. Whole thing is almost laughably absurd. She zigzags her way across the length of the incision, carefully, confidence growing with each stitch, and then, following Hank’s instruction, knots the end.

CHAPTER 30

Blood drips off Rooster's hands as he enters his trailer. He goes straight to the taxidermy room, since it's always a mess of animal hides, and cleans Amos's blood off his hands and face. He also cleans the revolver, which takes on the shine of a freshly minted quarter, and deposits it at his hip, snug in a brown paddle holster. The holster's formed especially for his make and model, not one-sixteenth of an inch to spare. A speed holster, though it wasn't advertised as such, for most don't consider the .357 a trustworthy conceal-carry weapon. Size is all wrong—you just can't get it out quick enough. Even the snub-nosed version, infinitely more compact, is weightier than today's semi-autos. The .357's weight is preferable. You never forget it's there.

He tosses the rag, which has a Rorschach blot of blood staining it, in an empty bucket, and then heads outside to find the car. But the gun has him distracted.

Rooster's been abstinent all week. First he turned down Meadow, then Wendy split while he was wailing on Amos—perhaps the violence unsettled her, but more likely she was worried about being implicated in the assault. Not that Amos would ever press charges. He limped back to his apartment to lick his wounds. Anyway, Wendy was starting to annoy Rooster.

He considers his last three conquests: Stephanie, Rosalyn, Lisa. He shakes his head. Too remarried, too sober, too packed up and moved as far away from Heritage as she could. Nashville, according to rumor. Lisa played guitar and covered Sheryl Crow songs at nearby dive bars. Gone to Music City to make it big after someone in Small Rock, a rowdy town just twelve miles east, tossed a beer mug at her onstage. Instead of

taking it as a sign of her own mediocrity, Lisa decided she'd outgrown those cramped, sweaty, majority-male venues and hit the road. But she'll return someday; Rooster's sure of it. She'll be back in his trailer by the end of the year.

And of course he catalogues women from long ago, specifically Eden. Her story might be the coincidence to beat all coincidences, but he needs to be sure. Standing outside the junkyard, ready at the gate, there isn't much that would distract Rooster. Nothing save the snap of twigs behind a coniferous thicket maybe fifty feet northeast.

He eases the big keychain back into his pocket and slows his breathing: long, even nasal intakes, shoulders relaxing as he exhales. Tiptoes closer to the trap. The noise—branches bending and swishing back, briars snagging and tearing free, leaves crunching—grows louder, coming straight for his position. It's a sizable creature, bigger than a coyote. Could be a buck, but most deer are clever enough to avoid rotting flesh, and this thing's barreling right for the bait.

Although mountain lions are rare in Iowa, it's not outside the realm of possibility; a while back, maybe this side of a decade, a Monona County sheriff shot a mountain lion in a tree. Pretty unsporting. No skill involved with a rifle at that range. Monona County is near the Nebraska/South Dakota/Iowa tristate area, but it's possible one or two mountain lions migrated toward Heritage. Stranger things have happened. Maybe this is the day all coincidences come to light.

Rooster holds his breath as he waits. He anticipates his movement: strafe, draw, fire. He's always wanted to put his quick draw ability to the test. And then he remembers—he read about the Monona County mountain lion in the Journal. He curses

himself silently for not talking to Senior about mountain lions when he went into the Journal earlier this week. If anyone would know it'd be Senior, who printed the original article. Made the front page news in Heritage. A color photo—which was a fairly recent development then, recalls Rooster—showed the dead mountain lion splayed across a truck's folded-down tailgate. The animal's eyes were closed and its mouth open, long canines under a peach-colored nose.

Ten feet away. Deep breath. Focus. This is *his* prize. Rooster sidesteps, reaching down for his pistol.

CHAPTER 31

After Eden sews both exit and entry wounds, Hank locates a small tool kit filled with miniature screwdrivers, assorted screws and nails, nuts and bolts, that sort of thing, under the kitchen sink. Eden remembers it from when she ransacked the house. She thinks of the money in the Bible again. It's enough for her and Bobby to get back on their feet somewhere, anywhere. Maybe she'll only take half. Or three-quarters.

"I'll help Bobby fix his car," says Hank. "Keep an eye on Sid, okay?"

He goes upstairs. While Eden monitors Sid's breathing, she catalogues all the things she's leaving behind. No final annual bouquet on her parents' side-by-side plots at Elm Grove Cemetery. Her friends, Shelby and Caroline. Would've been nice to say goodbye, let them know she was still alive. Goldie, her boss, who always treated her fairly. County fair. Farmers' Markets in the town square park. Did the townsfolk even know she was missing? Had a front page article been published about her mysterious disappearance? She suspected it had not. Even in a town as small as Heritage, there are those who fall through the cracks. Who disappear without much hullabaloo. Eden was one of those people.

Then there's Sid. Sweeping his dark bangs off his forehead, she wonders if he's also disappearable. When the grandfather clock chimes, Sid bolts awake, sitting up. His arms shoot out, stiff and extended like a zombie's. Eden chuckles.

"Thought I was gonna bite it." His arms relax. He goosenecks the bottle of vodka, then reconsiders. "Some bigwig gave this to Hank at his retirement party. Said he'd never open it, but I guess every drink has an occasion. Hey, can I get some water?"

Eden fills a glass to the brim. She rattles out three Tylenol pills. “What happened?”

“Rooster happened. His buddy Amos unloaded on me.” Sid tosses the pills back. His gulps tip the glass and spill water down his chin. The rings of his thyroid cartilage flex, Adam’s apple hopping up and down. He drains the glass and clears his throat.

Hank and Bobby come downstairs, Bobby much happier.

“Taking the car for a test drive,” says Hank.

At first Eden thinks he means the Subaru, not the Hot Wheels, and her heart, betraying her will, drops. She is surprised at her own reaction. Why prolong their stay? It’s Thursday. They’ve been here nearly a week. Time to move on.

The front door slams. Sid says, “Hank sew me up?”

“That was me.” Eden checks on his stitches. They’re holding for now. She should really take a wet, soapy rag and clean his leg, even if it’s still tender. Don’t want any infections.

“You coulda been a surgeon,” he says.

When she glances up, his eyes, dark and questioning, gaze into her own. She freezes. Slowly, his hand touches her hand. It feels obvious and her heart pounds. But he pulls away suddenly, staring at the kitchen sink.

“Sorry,” she says, embarrassed and unsure why.

“No,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

She forces a smile. “Everyone’s sorry.”

“Story of my life.”

“It’s okay.” Eden takes a seat at the table, crosses her legs. “Rest.”

“I should tell you something.”

She holds up her hands, a conversational surrender.

“My wife, she didn’t leave me. Didn’t divorce me, I mean. That’s not what happened.”

“Well, don’t be mad, but Hank already told me everything. About the accident and all. I think he was trying to, you know, set us up or whatever.”

“An accident, but my fault. I was behind the wheel. I braked too hard. As much my fault as the other driver’s.”

“What happened?”

And he tells her a story she already knows. I-35, rain, hit and run.

Eden’s mind fogs over. It’s like a startled awakening, that confusing stage between dream and reality. When you’re not sure what to believe.

“What...happened to the car that hit you?”

Sid snorts, running fingers up and down his scarred arm. “They never caught the guy. Drove one of those classic Trans Ams. I searched around for the car but never found much, although I just—”

Eden reaches for the table, trying to balance herself, but she bumps it and sends the knife sharpener clattering onto the kitchen floor. It rolls underneath the fridge. Quickly, she rushes for the stairs, feeling sick to her stomach.

In the bedroom, Eden pulls out her duffel bag and shuffles through the side pocket. How could this happen? All the small towns in Iowa, and Sid bumbles along the

very night she needs a lift? Why didn't she just steal or borrow a car or take the Amtrak?
She finds the picture.

Her and Zeke, years ago. They're smiling. His arm rests on her shoulder. They're standing in front of Zeke's 1979 Pontiac Trans Am. Black paint, gold firebird on the hood. A friend had taken that photo for them not long before her interstate accident. Eden kept it because it reminds her of better days, and the car behind them never bothered her enough to get rid of the photo. She figured, worst case, the occupants had some broken bones, minor lacerations. Figured they were more or less okay. Until today.

*

She relives it again. I-35. Rain falling in sheets. Six years ago, though it feels much longer. She rear ends the car in front of her and the slippery road does the rest of the work. The car hydroplanes and angles across the interstate, across the grassy median where it strikes the center support column of an overpass bridge. The car stands on front wheels for a moment, then slams back down. Smoke seethes from the hood.

Eden yelps as she slides across the gravel shoulder, somehow never losing control. Raindrops pitter-patter the windshield. She's still half drunk, half tweaked. Drugs and paraphernalia under the seat. Possession of a controlled substance, first offense: up to one year in jail. Serious misdemeanor, plus the DUI. She white-knuckles the steering wheel and straightens out. Drives. Her legs shake, but with each mile her decision feels better.

She continues south, unable to exit until Highway 92, offramping I-35 and passing by Winterset and driving to the outskirts of Heritage.

Rooster's junkyard. Rooster's trailer. Rooster's bed.

An hour later she's driving away in a 2006 Ford Mustang. It isn't raining in Heritage, but gray clouds fill the sky. No matter how much she scoots around in the driver's seat, she can't seem to get comfortable. Looking back, she knows that's when she first suspected.

Zeke, emerging from jail a week and a half later, claims to be a changed man. Loves the car, he says. Fifth gen, even better than a brand new one since they probably make 'em in China or Japan anymore. And anyway, the Trans Am was crapping out. CD lodged in the CD player. Belts squeaking. Rust camping out around the wheel wells. He's stoked to have a new car. In fact, he shows the same amount of excitement two months down the road when Eden, one hand over her swirling and slowly expanding tummy, tells him she's late.

*

She folds the photograph and stuffs it back into the duffel bag. Crawls into the bed, lifts the sheets up and over. Cocoons herself. Years ago, on a rainy stretch of I-35, she killed two people. Sid's wife and daughter. She had no idea.

He *has* no idea.

That most recent realization both comforts and haunts her, and she twists and twists her body, rolling the sheets tighter around herself, longing to emerge as something that can flap its wings and fly far, far away.

CHAPTER 32

Deputy John Pepper freezes, wide eyes almost comical. He looks haggard, both beard and scalp unshaven. The hair dusting his face reminds Rooster of that Woolly Willy toy, where you use a magnetic wand to move metal shavings onto the image of a bald, smiling, red-nosed man.

“I’s just coming to see you,” says Pepper. His uniform is disheveled: his shirt’s untucked, pant cuffs shredded from briars, one shoelace untied.

“Too bad I saw you first.”

Pepper’s wearing a tactical holster on his duty belt. Due to the holster’s special design, a twist is necessary, a quick, wrenching motion; no cop wants a suspect slipping his sidearm free during a pat down or arrest. Cuts down on draw time but not by much, not if you know what you’re doing. Rooster’s hand hovers over the butt of his .357. The men stand about ten paces apart.

“Hold on a minute...”

“Sneaking around my place, huh? You’re no woodsman, Pepper. Five gets you ten you never stepped foot in Alaska.”

“Rooster, hold on a damn minute. I got an anonymous tip about the Hartzes. Zeke’s been missing a few days now.”

“So I’ve heard. You got something against phones?”

“Yeah, they could be bugged. Okay, so I wasn’t in Alaska. I was in Tijuana.”

“Why lie?”

“Got, uh...picked something up from one of the locals.”

Rooster can't help but laugh. "Something itchy?"

"Screw you. Doc jacked all my money while I was dosed up. My inheritance at that. Far as my old man knows that money's invested in Alaska's crab fishing industry, a boat named *Fin & Tonic*. I take a few hundred out and mail it to him every week. Interest. I'm broke and bleeding."

"You're a regular Prodigal Son, Deputy Pepper."

"Not for long. I think I know who killed Zeke Hartz."

Rooster flinches, then calms himself. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I get to his wife and boy's house but no one's there. Place has been ransacked. Someone strung up a dog in the bedroom. A name written on the wall with what I'm guessing was the dog's blood. Sick bastard signed it and everything. Like he's taunting us. This guy, Sid Rivers—I dunno. Must be one of those vets that just loses it one day, guns down a whole family."

Pepper brushes dead leaves off his trousers, but his eyes never leave Rooster. His hand hovers above his sidearm. Rooster waits. The name smeared in blood might've been a little excessive. A little too hit-you-over-the-head and whatnot.

"So get your hand away from your gun," says Pepper.

"Why should I?"

"Because I have more info on the demo driver."

"Like your last update? Useless as a white crayon?"

"No, nothing like that. I know where he is."

Too good to be true. “You have half a minute to convince me you’re telling the truth. After that…”

“Okay. Got a call from a female cop in Comstock. She told me if someone’s holed up near Comstock, they’ll be tough to track down. Hermits and squatters here and there in the summer. Come winter, they ride the rails down to Phoenix or Albuquerque or wherever.”

“Time’s up.”

“Wait! She gave a few leads. Said he could be in the White Cloud Woods. Two hundred and fifty acres. Might try that apartment complex near the meat-packing plant, the one they call Little Mexico. Then there’s this off-the-grid farmhouse where some old farmer’s been fixing up a car for the past few years. Out in the middle of BFE.”

That’s it. “Sorry, Pep. A guy like me, I have to be careful. I wasn’t gonna actually draw on you—just making sure you aren’t some snitch. You understand, right?”

“Sure,” says Pepper, though his expression indicates otherwise.

“You have the addresses?”

“More like general locations,” says Pepper, tearing a sheet out of his police pad and hands it over.

“This is perfect. Certainly streamlines my approach.”

“Hey. That the mountain lion poison?”

“Gonna write me a citation?”

Pepper gives him a sour look. “So what’s next?”

“I need you in Dogwood, at the derby. You and Amos both. This guy’ll show up, Sid, and when he does, cuff and stuff him. Better yet, shoot him while attempting to escape, if you know what I mean.”

“In front of everyone?”

“If you have to. He killed Zeke. Isn’t it obvious? If we don’t act fast he’ll kill Zeke’s wife and boy too. Three murders, Pep. What’s gonna happen when you take down a serial killer in Iowa?”

“That’s a spree. Serial killing is three murders over the span of at least a month.”

“Whatever. If you get a second chance, you take it. Catch this guy and they’ll vote you in as sheriff. Tijuana be damned. Gambling debts be damned.”

“This Sid guy’s crazy—he’ll rabbit as soon as he thinks something’s up. I won’t be able to get within a hundred feet.”

Rooster laughs. “Don’t I always have a plan?”

CHAPTER 33

Friday, and Sid's leg burns. He changes out of yesterday's ripped and bloody jeans. The .38 he stashed in the truck, but from his right pants pocket he pulls out a clear baggie the size of a matchbook. He crushes the white powder inside with pinched fingers. Doesn't seem like much. A gram or two. For now, he stores it in the pocket of his new jeans. Just until he gets a chance to pitch it. Wouldn't want Bobby mistaking it for something sugary sweet.

Downstairs, Hank rattles a bottle of Tylenol, tells him to take a seat. "No way can you demo tonight." He tips the bottle and five pills Yahtzee out on the kitchen table.

"This isn't a negotiation," growls Sid, scooping up a couple Tylenol.

Hank thrusts a plate in front of him: veggie sandwich. Garden-fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, cheese, and lettuce; a liberal spread of mayo across yesterday's bread. "Eat something," he says, "or the pills will give you a bellyache."

"I'm not hungry. And I don't like cucumbers."

"You complain more'n the boy does."

Sid taps his fingers. He removes cucumber slices like he's pulling cards from the middle of the deck. Eden and Bobby are out back, working the garden. She's been reticent since Sid spilled his guts yesterday. That's what he gets for being honest. No wonder our legal system's clogged with not-guilty pleas—people respect a known liar more than an open book. She found out about his road rage, his brake-checking, that one moment in Sid's life that he wishes away when he wakes up, when he goes to bed, when

he's driving from one small town to the next, before every demolition derby, and she can't resist passing judgment on him after that. In a way he doesn't blame her.

So why not trade her for information on the Trans Am? Rooster acted like he knew something big, but what if that's all it is—an act? A cornered man will say anything to save his skin. Doesn't mean he's lying, though.

Sid groans, his wound reminding him that it hasn't gone anywhere. Feels like the devil's pinching his left leg, especially when he pivots his knee. He bites his cheek, relocating the pain. Slides another cucumber from his sandwich over to the discard pile.

“Better fill me in,” says Hank. “You've had a busy couple days.”

He tells Hank about the closet deal. About how Rooster killed Zeke and wants to pin it on Sid. About how Bobby might be Rooster's son. The information exchange. How he might be closer than ever to finding out who killed his wife and child...if he returns Eden and Bobby to Heritage.

“I never should've given them a ride in the first place,” says Sid. “All I'd be doing is setting things straight.”

“Setting things straight, wow. What about the blood on your hands?”

“Don't preach to me, Chappie. I'm not pulling the trigger.”

“You may as well be.”

“It's the only way I can get Rooster to tell me what he knows.”

“The end justifies the means? Doubt Jessica would agree with that.”

“Jessica's dead.” Sid is surprised by his own words. You can't deny the veracity of his statement: indeed, Jess is buried alongside their daughter in the Iowa Falls

Veteran's Cemetery. Driving off with Eden last week—before he realized she was only using him for transportation—a pang of guilt pierced his side, sure, but he rationalized it as easily as a snap of the fingers. He is a man. He has needs. He'd waited long enough; Jess would understand. But his lack of reverence today, acknowledging that his former wife has no sway, guilt trip or other, over his current actions—this sentiment is new and shocking to Sid.

“And this Rooster fella?” asks Hank. “You gonna kill him?”

“If it was him driving that Trans Am, I dunno. Maybe.”

“Oughta come up with a better plan than ‘I don't know’ and ‘maybe.’”

“I oughta do a lot of things.”

“You can't dangle them in front of Rooster's nose and expect everything to work out fine and dandy. Think this guy has your best interests in mind? He told you exactly what you wanted to hear and you bought it hook, line, and sinker.”

“But I have to know for sure.”

“Stubborn kid,” says Hank. “I always thought if I got you back on course, then maybe going AWOL wasn't so bad.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Silence fills the farmhouse as Hank disappears around the corner and leaves Sid at the kitchen table. His appetite pulled up stakes, left town. He might not return to the farmhouse after tonight. Even if he somehow survives, things won't be the same again with Hank. When you leave, things change. You change. It was like that in the Air Force.

He was away in Afghanistan, at Bagram Air Base, for the better part of a year, performing routine maintenance tasks or pouring over documentation. Keeping those turboprop engines war ready. When he first got to Bagram, he was surprised at the civilian activity: TCNs, terps, ISAF contractors, and reporters with flak jackets that had PRESS stamped over their chests. Sid wondered why anyone would be there who didn't have to be. A tech sergeant on the Disney side shook his hand and said, "Ramadan's coming to an end. Welcome to hell." Mortars shellacked CHUs, T walls, and shipping containers on a daily basis. Walking from the DFAC to his shop, he passed an MRAP just as its tail end exploded, burning fiery yellow and red. The armored vehicle was relatively unscathed—they're meant to withstand landmines and IEDs—but even so, it shook Sid up. He couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

But coming home is a different kind of war. When Sid returned stateside, nothing felt the same. During trips to Fareway with Jess and Tabby, he scanned the aisles of breakfast cereal and canned vegetables for potential threats. In church, he knew every egress, knew that if someone came in shooting he'd shove his family under the pew, grab two hymnals and use them to shield his face and heart. Identify the hazards, assess the risk. "You've changed," said Jess. She called it defensive living—like defensive driving, only you expect the worst from people no matter where they are, what they're doing. Back then Sid blew the notion off because men always believe they're in control. Only today, years later, does he notice. It's as subtle as watching a beautiful sunset. You're mesmerized, and then suddenly you look around and it's dark outside.

Sid pours another cup of coffee and leans over the counter and against the open window. Out back, Eden and Bobby work the garden. Bobby's barefooted, blue jeans stained green at the knees, that sheepish, boyish look of hesitation on his face. Sid's hands shake, both the caffeine on an empty stomach and pre-derby jitters. Hallelujah Jim always said when you stop getting the jitters, quit. If you don't feel it, why do it? Sid dumps his coffee in the sink and heads for the garden, throwing his jacket on.

"Sid!" calls out Bobby, his high-pitched voice cracking on the vowel.

Sweat glistens on Eden's chest, just above her tank top. Dirt treks across her throat in lines as fine as welding wire. The gloves she wears are two sizes too big. She ignores Sid, pretending to weed around the summer squash and cucumbers.

Bobby holds out his hand. "Hank fixed it," he says, displaying his Hot Wheels. Bobby pinches the car's frame and careens it off a sunflower stalk. "Want to play?"

"No time. Sorry, kid."

"Why don't you go inside, Bobby," says Eden.

The boy squints. "Huh?"

"Go inside." Eden bites her lower lip, looking away from Sid.

Bobby reluctantly obeys. When the back screen door snaps shut, Sid asks Eden if they're packed yet. She says no, not yet.

"Well, get packed. I decided to drive you somewhere safer."

"What about the station wagon?"

"I'll bring it later, after the derby tonight. Come on, I'll drop you off on the way."

“That doesn’t make sense.” She moves in closer. Her breath smells like candied apples. Her eyes are wide, sclera accentuating green iris. “What are you not telling me?”

Most people think a knockout punch relies on heavyweight strength. Wrong. It’s location and technique. An effective uppercut connects at an angle with the chin: the violent head twist causes a loss of consciousness. Maybe he’ll just take Eden, leave Bobby here with Hank. That’d be easier. He’ll throw her in the cab and head out.

He says, “Guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

“The hell I will.”

“The hell you won’t. I got shot because of you, lady. Now pack up and let’s go.”

“You got shot because you went back...” Her face blanches. “Did you talk to Rooster?”

“Get packed.”

“No!”

Something inside of Sid breaks. He grabs her shoulders, wanting to scream at her and kiss her all at once, and works his fingers underneath her tank top’s shoulder straps. He grips her tight, hands on her acromion bone, thumbs running the length of her clavicles, but she doesn’t struggle or back away, just burns her gaze into his own. Her flesh is bare and warm under his brawny hands.

Eden punches his chest, but instead of winding up for another blow, she grabs a fistful of his jacket, the fine bronze teeth of the zipper groaning. She doesn’t even blink. In her demeanor Sid recognizes something that’s always been there, since that first night

she approached him in the Wagon Wheel, a sadness overcome, something Sid should be able to spot in others.

Finally he relents. Backs away, and Eden uncurls her grip.

“I’m leaving,” he tells her, barely able to speak. “Don’t be here when I get back.”

Eden breathes heavily. The fierce green fire in her eyes remains. “I thought— you’re leaving? Where are you going?”

There’s nothing to say. Whatever will become of Eden and Bobby, will become. They’ll drive away on the highways and interstates and blacktops and gravel roads until they feel safe. A part of Sid envies them. A part of him doesn’t. He loads up his Buick and prepares to do what he does best: drive headlong into the crash.

CHAPTER 34

“Hogs get here first thing in the morning,” Butch Munday says. “Mercy, how they scream walking down that plank! They know. Animals know, pal. Believe it. Friday we get our biggest shipment, then the weekend crew is all packers.

“No one here can cut as fast as I can. Volume is everything. The line moves so fast, there’s no time to sharpen your knife. So you grab another. Then that one dulls and you keep on cutting, you cut harder and harder.”

Rooster, seated across the break room table, rubs his whiskers. “Most people don’t last more than a few months at the slaughterhouse. Ever consider commuting to Heritage and working at the fabrication plant? Pays better, and I could definitely hook you up. I have some pull.”

Butch Munday is in his high 20s, close to Rooster’s age but those years a lot harder lived. He has a Porky Pig tattoo on his neck. The cartoon ham’s wearing a suit coat and a bowtie but no pants; he tips his hat, one of those Forties-style boaters made out of straw. A large man, six-foot-nothing with a compact torso and kangaroo legs, Butch weighs in at two-fifty, two-sixty maybe, and most of that bulky muscle, not fat, sewn on his bones, as though he’s been bred throughout generations solely for intimidation purposes. If Rooster had to establish betting odds for a fistfight between Butch and Amos, it’d be pick ’em. Amos is taller, bigger, longer reach; Butch meaner and nastier. It would be a fight for the ages.

Around these parts Butch is best known for disbanding the abattoir union a few years back. He has thus far successfully stymied all effort, whether it originated in-house

or the at-large community, at union reformation. When Rooster sought him out he had a pig under each arm, carrying them to the kill-and-bleed room. Giant hooks suspended from the ceiling reminded Rooster of his traps.

They sit in the break room and converse, Rooster trying to ignore the distant chopping sounds. There are five tables and a couple dozen folding chairs. Two microwaves, one on top of the other. Pop machine and a fridge. The fridge's compressor fan coughs and wheezes. Laminated signs above the sink encourage washing one's own dishes, yet bowls and cups and plates coated with assorted sauces pile up, an uneasy pyramid. A lone strand of spaghetti clings to the splash guard.

"The work's a bit repetitive," says Butch. He leans in over the table. He's still wearing his bloody apron. "But let me tell you, we have the best damn company barbecues in the state." Then he laughs. There's a raw power in his laughter, and if the booming guffaws weren't enough, he slams his hand down, rattling the table legs. His hand is bigger than a flatiron skillet.

He's perfect. Perfect muscle, perfect patsy. If things at the farmhouse go belly up, might be nice to have Butch around.

The Porky Pig tattoo ripples as Butch continues laughing. Finally he stops and stretches out his thick red-freckled arms and nods at Rooster's bandaged arm.

"Fall down some stairs?"

"Something like that."

"Should be more careful, pal."

"I should," says Rooster. "I may be a father."

“But you’re not sure?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Women lie,” says Butch, shaking his head. “Get bloodwork before you cough up any dough. Me, I’ve beat two paternity suits.”

“That’s an impressive record.”

“Well, I lost a couple too,” Butch admits. He yawns and stretches some more, arm veins bulging. “You know that scene in the first *Rocky* movie? Where he uses slabs of beef as a punching bag? That’s legit.”

While he’s talking another employee walks in, but he freezes in the breakroom’s doorway when he spots Butch. The man mumbles something about a smoke break and disappears.

Butch, unphased, continues his story. “I practice on hogs all the time. They’re not as tough as cattle, but you can punch ’em till they’re burger. I could’ve been a boxer like Rocky, if I grew up in Chicago or Philly. My old man wouldn’t buy me gloves, though—said they’d give me pillow hands. I said, ‘Pops, Rocky’s got gloves,’ and he said, ‘Kid, you ain’t no Rocky Balboa.’ I could still box professionally. I stay in shape punching the hogs. No one cares about pigs, man. Except those weirdoes that have them as pets.” He eyes Rooster.

“I’m more of a trapper myself,” says Rooster. “Don’t have much use for pets.”

Butch nods approvingly, pulling a two-gallon milk jug full of water up to his thick lips. He guzzles the water, which trails down his chin and spatters his bloody apron.

“Here’s the deal, pal. I know all aboutchu. Got a big junkyard, some nice equipment in there. I help you out and you let me pick something from the yard.”

“Of course—whatever you want.”

“I want the crop duster.”

“What?” hisses Rooster. “You know what that plane’s *worth?*”

“Thinking about starting up a rental business. Make twenty, twenty-five bucks an acre dusting crops.”

“Guess I could lease it out...”

“Hey—thing flies, right?”

Rooster runs his tongue along the inside of his teeth.

“Best we check,” says Butch, “before I go getting my hands dirty.”

*

They speed toward Heritage in Rooster’s Lincoln, carrying the stink of the slaughterhouse with them. All four windows are down. The pine tree air freshener tornadoes under the rear-view mirror. ‘Life in the Fast Lane’ plays courtesy of The Eagles and KFUN radio. It’s getting dark and Rooster knows finding the farmhouse will be trickier at night—house didn’t even pop up on Google Maps. The “address” Pepper gave him is only landmarked directions, i.e., off Highway 34, curl around the Comstock bypass, down a dirt road, past an old windmill...

Butch asks what the job is.

“I’m looking for a woman and her son. Rumor is they’re at a farmhouse outside of Comstock. You know—back the *other* way.”

“And you need me to retrieve them?”

“It’s a delicate affair. They’re being protected by an old man.” Rooster pauses.

“Being held against their will.”

“Meh,” says Butch, as though he’s heard worse. Likely he has.

A tan blur in the ditch catches Rooster’s eye. He stomps the brakes and curves onto the shoulder.

“Geez, pal!”

“Though I saw something...looked like a mountain lion.”

“Ha! No mountain lions around here.”

“Maybe,” says Rooster.

At the junkyard he tugs the tarp off his Air Tractor. The tarp’s actually two pieces sewn together, a rectangular shape, musty and stiff, mildewed by rain and ironed by the sun. Feels ready to crack. Meanwhile Butch mans the forklift, shoving stacks of cars and pallets of tires out of the way, clearing a path from the gate to the crop duster. He moves fast; a couple times Rooster winces, expecting the forklift to tip over. About full dark now. They should be out looking for the farmhouse. As Butch stabs a minivan, piercing its side with his forks, Rooster backs closer to the plane. He feels around the nose until he finds what he’s looking for. Uses his .357 like a hammer, two taps. With his boots he scrapes dirt over the busted glass.

Butch parks the forklift beside the plane. He grins. “I’m even better flying a plane.”

His makeshift runway looks pretty good under the powering-up security lights.

Few divots, a stray two-by-four, but it's a straight shot from plane to gate. Probably do in a pinch. The crop duster's a two-seater, but Rooster waves off Butch's invitation to join him in the cockpit.

"Someone been screwing in here?" says Butch, kneeling on the wing and opening the window hatch. "Smells like sweat. Need one of them tree thingies."

"...an air freshener?"

"Yeah, that's what I said." He eases into the plane. Barely enough room for the big guy; looking at him, you wouldn't expect him to have the grace, the lithe touch necessary to work a touchscreen phone, much less fly a plane. Rooster shakes his head. People will surprise you like that.

"Kick them chocks out when I give the signal," says Butch.

"You bet."

To Rooster's surprise the Air Tractor roars to life, noise unbearably loud. Butch, head and shoulders visible as he sits in the cockpit, frowns at the instruments. He throws his hands in the air, exasperated, then cuts power and hops down.

"I'll be damned," he says. "She fires up but the lights don't work. Maybe—"

"First thing in the morning then," says Rooster, already making his way back to the Lincoln.

CHAPTER 35

An excited chatter permeates the grandstand. The Dogwood Derby, nominally part of the county fair, is held on the opposite side of town. The fair shuts down early and everyone makes it over to the track on Friday night. High-schoolers arrive wearing la mode du jour: yellow, red, and blue glowsticks fixed to their bodies like necklaces. They carry oversized stuffed animals, sparkly yo-yos, beach balls. The town mayor rides around the otherwise empty track in the back of a Camaro convertible, choking on dust but reveling nonetheless in his limited celebrity. A pigeon-chested woman sings the national anthem. While fire engines hose down the track, Sid parks in the pit with the other drivers and scans the crowd for Rooster. No sign of him yet. Still early.

Dogwood's a hardscrabble town of no more than twenty-five hundred, but because they offer two grand for first place, drivers come from all over the state. The cars here are decked out with nicknames, sloppy white spray paint across their hoods or tops, things like HELLBILLY and JUGGERNAUT and SCREAMIN' EAGLE.

Participants are divvied up into four heats. Multi-heat derbies produce a more deserving winner—anyone can get lucky in one event; winning two or even three times proves your worth both behind the wheel and under the hood. With numerous heats any number of things can go wrong. Sure, you have a spare tire, but what if you need two? Or three? How fast can you patch up leaks? Speed weld? The true skill lies in putting your derby car back together again.

There are four groups of six, twenty-four drivers including one female, a young mom from Ida Grove whose Marine husband is overseas. Her derby car's a big boat, a

squarish Pontiac the model of which Sid can't quite determine. She's in the first grouping; Sid drew the final heat, so he leans into the springy chain-link fence and watches the first go. The announcer draws attention to "the first female driver in Dogwood Derby history." He requests prayers or well wishes for her deployed husband. Crowd noise dies out just as engines roar and the cars begin to bludgeon one another. She doesn't win but places second, guaranteeing a spot in the final event so long as she can get her fuel pump working. Her car sputters and lurches back to the pit. Starting fluid sprayed around the intake or into the spark plug holes is a quick, temporary fix. Sid wonders if she has a bottle handy.

"Hey," comes a gruff and familiar voice behind him.

Sid turns around to see Amos Attridge, goatee shaved off, fresh lumps and bruises around his face. Three butterfly bandages extend his left eyebrow. He's wearing a plain black t-shirt and holding onto a denim jacket like he's wringing its neck. The barrel of his M-16 forearm tattoo curls as he clenches his burly fist.

"Hate to see how the other guy looks."

Amos doesn't reply.

"Where's Rooster?"

"Where's Eden? And the boy? Huh?" Amos reaches in to frisk Sid.

"You shot at me," says Sid, backing away. "Remember?"

"First time you been shot at, Chair Force?"

With the lights behind him, Amos looks bigger, and Sid wishes he *was* packing, wishes he hadn't left the .38 in his pickup. He'll have to rely on his quickness, but his

wounded leg mitigates that advantage. Fortunately Amos doesn't seem to know about Sid's injury.

The second heat begins, and it's a quick one. Sid gets the feeling that Amos isn't here to derby. He wonders if he even signed up. "Not interested in a rematch?"

"More important things to deal with tonight."

With the first two heats down and two more to go, it's a halftime of sorts. The crowd rises as "God Bless America" booms over the PA system. Amos snaps to attention and fixes his eyes on the American flag, which droops lifelessly from the broadcaster's booth.

When the music dies down, the crowd roars in applause.

"Sometimes I think I should've stayed in," says Sid, still looking at the flag.

"Me too."

"You'd go back?"

Amos snaps his fingers. "Like that."

"Other times I wished I'd never joined."

"Yeah? What'd you do while you were in?"

"I fixed things," says Sid.

"Shee-yit, I miss being over there. Give anything to go back."

Sid nods. He gets it. Some people are good with numbers; they become accountants. Others find they are skilled with their hands and become surgeons. Amos has a skill set unappreciated, undervalued outside of war.

On the track, an announcement is made for everyone to return to their seats. The derby will continue in five minutes.

“So what,” says Amos, spitting to the side, “you wanna see the Trans Am you been asking about?”

“It’s here? Bullshit.”

“You think I walked all the way to Dogwood? Come on, Chair Force.”

Amos leads Sid away from the pit. Headlights splay over them, late arrivals. Portable air compressors snap on. A smell that can only be welding rods melting through spray paint and aluminum fills the air. The call goes out for those assigned to the third heat to bring their cars onto the track.

“There’s no Trans Am,” guesses Sid, stopping as they get to a waist-high chain-link fence. “You must think I’m stupid.”

“See for yourself.”

They walk away from the pit, Sid keeping his distance from Amos. Down a small hill and there it is. Even in the darkness, there’s no mistaking it. Old school Trans Am, black with the gold firebird hood. Parked in the grass, tilted by a landscaped easement that dips down toward a creek.

“What the...”

“Told you,” says Amos.

Sid approaches cautiously. Sure enough, the front is damaged. License plate dimpled like cottage cheese. Headlights busted up. Bumper dents. His heart rate redlines.

After years and years of wondering what it would feel like, he's finally here in that moment.

"Yeah," says Amos. "Leave it to the Army to save the day, huh? When Rooster gets back from the farmhouse, he'll sell it to you cheap."

The farmhouse? They know. Somehow, they know. "Hell with all that. I'm leaving."

"Can't let you do that, Chair Force."

"Think you can stop me?"

"Your funeral."

Amos moves fast for his size. He nearly plunges the boot knife into Sid's liver. If not for a quick sidestep, Sid would be bleeding out. As it is, Amos only scrapes a quick cut along Sid's forearm. When the blade passes, Sid strikes, grabbing Amos's upper body while twisting his wrist. The boot knife falls and plunges blade-first into the ground.

But Amos doesn't need a weapon to injure. He catapults a fist that hammers down on Sid's left shoulder, the blow so fierce that Sid's entire arm goes numb. It's all he can do to keep upright. He swallows hard. Now or never. Rushing forward in the dark, Sid head-butts Amos, his forehead cracking on the bigger man's left eye ridge, right over the trio of butterfly bandages. Sid's vision clouds momentarily; Amos, conversely, blinded in one eye, stumbles down the easement, banging against the Trans Am.

While he's dazed, taking a knee, Sid breaks for the F-150. His injured leg gives him a noticeable limp. Ginger ale fizzes through his left arm. Feels like a razor is stuck in

his throat. Hands shaking well enough to prove he's alive. He makes it through the pit and jams the key in the truck's ignition.

Nothing.

He backed out his Buick, even unhooked the empty trailer in case he needed to jet afterward, but didn't think about someone messing with the battery cables. Someone must've snuck in while he was looking at the Trans Am.

Before he can exit, a bald cop appears at the door. He smooths his already crisp uniform and rests a hand on the butt of his holstered semi-auto. The star on his breast reads DEPUTY, brass nameplate displaying his surname: PEPPER. He shakes his head at Amos, who's still incapacitated near the fence line. The way he regards Amos makes Sid think they more than know each other—they're in cahoots. He recalls something Eden said about not being able to approach the cops in Heritage.

"We need to talk," says Pepper, pulling his sidearm out with a quick wrist rotation. "Step out of the vehicle."

Pepper leans over and raps his knuckles across the F-150's window. When Sid doesn't budge, Pepper taps the glass with his pistol. Sid's mind races. The .38's jammed in the glove box. Damn—why didn't he pocket it earlier? He puts his hands up on the wheel, thinking this is it, this is the end.

"Hey! It's you!"

The voice comes from the other side of his truck. Sid blinks, the recognition coming slowly, in waves; peach fuzz moustache, thin frame, baby face. Beak nose and

close-set eyes. Six-foot-fiver. The big farm boy he pulled out of the fiery minivan last weekend. The kid beams, understanding Sid remembers him.

“Who are you?” barks Pepper.

But the kid, walking around the truck, ignores Pepper. “I’m eighteen now. You see me out there? I placed in the first heat.”

“Kid,” says Pepper, “get out of here. You don’t understand what’s going on.”

When Pepper shifts his weight, Sid bursts through the door and knocks the deputy back with a chop across the bald officer’s ear. He was aiming for his larynx, but Pepper is quick, deflecting the brunt of Sid’s attack. Sid plants a foot on Pepper’s boot and shoves him backward while grabbing his pistol, wrenching it free as the deputy tumbles back.

The semi-auto is a step up from his .38. Sid thumbs the clip release and checks the magazine. Full. He drives back the slide but, to his surprise, Pepper didn’t have one chambered.

The farm kid, wide-eyed now, says, “Whoa.”

Sid races back for the Buick, praying Pepper didn’t disable that as well. Thankfully the Buick growls to life, and Sid varooms around, cutting in between his truck and the writhing Pepper. He reaches for the burner phone—thank God he kept *that* in the derby car.

But there’s no response. Sid brakes as the phone rings three times, four, five. Nothing. Hank doesn’t own an answering machine, so the phone rings on and on, each chirrup increasing Sid’s heart rate.

The Buick has no brake lights or headlights. It's over a hundred miles to Hank's with only a four-gallon tank sloshing around in the back. Tuned port injection burns more fuel in exchange for extra horses: perfect for derby, not so much highway miles. Give Sid twenty minutes, a crescent wrench, and some pliers, and he could reroute the fuel lines back to the big tank; that is, if Hallelujah Jim hadn't removed it. With any luck he'll splash-and-go at a gas station, dump just enough in the portable tank to make it back to the farmhouse.

Sid drops the Buick back into gear. From the limited lighting he can just make out Amos Attridge standing in front of the gate, both hands up, boot knife in one of them. Sid stomps on the gas, the Buick's front end rising in response. Amos doesn't budge.

Sid's mind redlines. He thinks in LOAC terminology, Amos as a lawful combatant. Military necessity, proportionality, unnecessary suffering—morality grays up nicely with military logic. The Buick's six cylinders rattle, a predatory snarl as it moves forward. Amos throws his hands in the air and drops his knife but doesn't leap out of the way. Sid wonders what the hell this guy's on—it looks like he's preparing to pounce on the Buick.

At the last second Sid swerves the Buick around Amos, almost colliding with parked cars that are nosed right up against the pit. Tires kick gravel, rocks thumping off bumpers and hoods and windshields. People shout at Sid. He drives on, instinctually glancing where the rear-view mirror should be but isn't.

The highway is dark and deserted as he heads west, away from the track and Dogwood itself. The moon, barricaded by tree line, offers minimal lighting. Sid tries

propping a flashlight on the dash, shining out where the windshield once was, but he loses grip and the flashlight rolls onto the passenger seat. The distraction nearly causes him to miss a curve and barrel off into a No Passing Zone sign.

He calls Hank again. No answer. He can take care of himself, right? Got the shotgun he always keeps handy, plus an assortment of firearms in the basement.

Someone on the other end. Sid's heart is lodged in his throat.

"Hello?" Eden's voice.

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean? Where are you? Are you driving?"

Click. "Eden?"

A faint electronic hum persists, but nothing else. He shouts her name. No response.

CHAPTER 36

Bullfrogs croak. Thimbleweed and prairie sage crackles. Maple, oak, and hackberry leaves rustle. Dog day cicadas yammer. Katydid cheep. Whippoorwills sing their eponymous notes as coyotes on a hill far away howl at the moon, which is clipped down to the fine and even thumbnail of God.

Butch Munday tiptoes through the cow pasture.

Rooster follows. The big man offers quite a silhouette, and, Rooster notes, will come in handy as a human shield should it come down to that. Distracted, Rooster steps in the middle of a fresh cow pie and swears loudly, dropping the wire cutters. He leans against Butch as he scrapes his boot heel off with a stick.

“Quiet,” whispers Butch. Hours later and the stink of the slaughterhouse lingers. He’s wearing cowboy boots and dark Levi’s and a black t-shirt, arms thick and veiny where exposed. His boots have toes that come to a sharp point—roach killers. Kick a fallen man with those and you’ll break a rib, maybe pop his lungs.

They hug the cattle gate, climbing over one at a time. No trees, so they take cover behind the big white LP tank. The screen door fuzzes what’s inside, but Rooster thinks he sees Eden trying to get the phone to work. Looks like the boy’s stretched out on the couch, playing with something small, moving it across the couch’s arm.

“Think she’s trying to call for help?” asks Butch.

“Hmm. We should cut the power too.”

“That’ll spook ’em for sure, though.”

“Whatever,” says Rooster. “It’s your show.”

Yellow light spills from the barn. Shadows strobe the hayloft as a mechanical whirr punctures the sounds of nature. Butch indicates that Rooster should stay and watch the house while he checks on the barn.

“My thoughts exactly,” says Rooster, resting the .357 in his lap.

Butch slides the barrel of his Glock back far enough to spy inside the ejection port, ensuring a bullet is chambered. The pistol has a big fat suppressor on it, homemade by Butch himself. Calls it a hushpuppy. “It’s okay if I kill him?” he asks, nodding toward the barn. “The woman and boy, they ain’t tied up or anything.”

“Looks can be deceiving, my friend. Don’t you know about Stockholm Syndrome?”

“I do not,” admits Butch.

“A story for the return trip, then,” says Rooster. “Take care of business.”

Butch walks like a caveman, a regular Cro-Magnon, hunched over to stay below the window’s line of sight as he heads for the barn. His metal boot tips catch moonlight and wink back at Rooster, who waits for Eden and Bobby to flee out the back door.

CHAPTER 37

Static. Eden hangs up the phone, thinking that the line could've gone out for any number of reasons. Fallen tree. Power surge. Animal chewing or scratching the cords, most likely. Some kind of bird. A squirrel perhaps.

Why was he calling? She fears the worst. Maybe Rooster, if he put the pieces together, spilled the whole story to Sid. Maybe, *maybe*, that was the source of anger she heard in Sid's voice before the phone cut off.

In any case it's not worth sticking around to find out. She races upstairs, checking the bedroom and the bathroom, ensuring they didn't leave anything. Not that they had much to begin with. Few bucks, few clothes stuffed into the duffel bag that sits on the bed. It would be so easy to lift what money they need from Hank's Bible stash, but with everything he's done for them, it'd probably be bad karma or something. Eden sighs. Is she getting soft?

Hank had better hurry. She considers heading out to the barn. Earlier she asked if the wheel bearings really needed re-greased and he said sure, most people just toss the old bearings and install new ones. But that's city mentality. On the farm, you make things last.

Well, forget that. She's sick of farm life and the lack of civilization.

Bobby enters holding a tan bag, which Eden slowly recognizes as an MRE. Hank must've given it to him for the drive.

"Beef stew," Bobby proudly announces.

"You can eat it in the car. We're leaving."

“What about Sid?”

“We’ll send him a postcard,” says Eden, although from where she’s still unsure. One thing for certain: anywhere is better than here. She spies a pair of Bobby’s socks rolled up into balls and nestled under the dresser.

“We don’t have spares,” she lectures Bobby, unzipping the duffel bag. Inside the main compartment she finds a rectangular envelope stuffed with cash. Big bills, twenties, fifties, but mostly hundreds. She starts counting and loses track when it gets to five figures. Hank’s stash and then some. Or was it Sid’s this whole time? Does he actually make money at demolition derby? There’s no note, just her name in cursive on the envelope.

“That sneaky son of a…” she says, smiling for a moment.

But her smile evaporates as a thought occurs. Her hands tremble as she frantically searches for the photograph, the one with her and Zeke in front of the Trans Am.

It’s gone.

Her heart drops.

“Stay here, Bobby. Eat your beef stew. Be ready to leave as soon as I get back.”

So that’s why Sid grabbed her before heading out—he saw the photo. Damn! But why’d he leave the money? Doesn’t matter, she tells herself. Time to leave. She runs down the stairs and slaps the screen door open, her heart cinched in a noose.

CHAPTER 38

Sid veers around a combine. The farmer has a reflective orange triangle on his cab, but with no headlights, Sid doesn't see him until the last second. The Buick maxes out around eighty. If a white-tail noses out in front of him, he's a dead man. At that speed a deer will cut right through the engine block, skull cracking the windshield—if, of course, Sid had a windshield.

Thump!

Headlights stream though his Buick at the same time it shudders, carrying only enough weight and momentum to maintain course. A little harder tap to the left or right and Sid would be barrel-rolling in the ditch right now.

He swears, glancing over his shoulder. His eyes are watering from the speed but there's no mistaking that hood decoration; it's the Trans Am. Psychological warfare. With so many other elements removed, the déjà vu doesn't happen. This isn't about back then. It's about right now. Sid stomps on the accelerator, which coughs. Fuel won't last much longer. An oncoming semi-truck, alerted by their lack of headlights, shines his brights and pulls his horn, a loud bleating.

“Yeah, yeah,” says Sid.

Amos nudges Sid again, this time racking him good, forcing the Buick into the other lane. Two headlights like the eyes of a monster stare him down. Fear blossoms in his chest, works its way down to his groin. The semi downshifts, grinding gears. Just as Sid crosses back over the double yellow lines, the semi whooshes past.

Gotta let him get around. Not much chance of outmaneuvering the Trans Am; his Buick was built for derbies, not highway. Even back in the day, in its prime, it would've made a better bruiser than cruiser. Mud tires wobble, power steering wheezes, and the engine chugs fuel like a tank. It was hard enough keeping it on the highway before Amos Attridge showed up.

CHAPTER 39

A bat swoops across the front yard, gulping mosquitoes and moths, squeaky, rapid-fire echolocation making Eden wince as she heads for the barn. Stars half covered by clouds, sky like a dusty chalkboard. Slight chill in the air. Barn door's wide open—she thought for sure Hank closed it up before.

“Hank!”

She races inside and finds Hank in front of the Subaru. Ten feet away, a big red-haired stranger dressed in black wields an extra-long pistol. Light from above, blocked by a crossbeam, only reveals half his body, the half with the weapon. Makes him look like a cartoon villain, oversized and constantly in bad lighting. The stranger grins like he recognizes her somehow. The confidence plastered on his face fills her with dread.

“Sid,” she says out loud. Stomach does a loop de loop. So this is how people die. “He sold us out.”

“No, he wouldn't do that,” says Hank, moving closer to Eden as though to shield her. He holds his shotgun chest-high, wide stance, sweaty brow, a little less sure of himself than the other man. “This guy says Sid got arrested. Rooster, he tracked you down.”

Eden gulps. “Where is Rooster?”

“Don't you worry about that,” says the red-haired stranger, his pointy-toed cowboy boots scraping the floor as he turns slightly toward her. His voice, low and even. Doesn't seem like this is his first standoff. “You're safe now.”

Safe? “What are you talking about?” Eden’s mind races double the speed limit.

Rooster’s here! What about Bobby? “I left Bobby inside...”

“Keep still,” says Hank. “No sudden movements.”

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t—”

“Drop that gun, gramps.”

“How much he paying you?”

“Enough. Plenty. Drop the gun and you might walk away from this.”

“Silencer there, that just for show?”

The big stranger smiles, straight teeth with a yellow hue. “Homemade. I call her my hushpuppy. You wanna hear my hushpuppy bark?”

All around Eden the barn seems to shrink; walls creep closer, roof lowered until it touches her head. Latent claustrophobia resurfaced and constricting her throat so that all she can do is choke out some words about Bobby, how she has to go find him.

Hank shakes his head. “Eden, stay here.”

“You ain’t making the calls no more, pal.”

“Shut up!”

“Make me,” yells the stranger, his arm flexing, the pistol making a sound like a roll of biscuits popping open.

Hank stays in front of Eden and grunts before returning fire with his shotgun. The big man’s chest turns into a gnat cloud, angry and black and swirling, and he drops with a bloodcurdling scream. Hank also crumbles to the barn floor.

The red-haired stranger laughs. Eden grabs the shotgun and twists around. Blood seeps out his chest, as thick as gravy, a ladle-full with each heartbeat, and yet he laughs.

“I’ve never missed before,” he says.

That’s when Eden smells smoke. An open Zippo and small fangs of yellow fire by the man’s leg. His feet are rocking side to side as he struggles to stay conscious. Flames race across the barn floor, aided by straw and rags and dry wood. The stranger laughs some more and raises his silenced pistol, grip shaky, fingers slippery with blood. Eden two-hands the shotgun, aiming for his face. Heat makes her squint. She pulls the trigger.

The gun jerks like a game of tug-o-war. Warm blood spatters her upper arms and hands. The film strip of her vision skips forward a few frames. Self-preservation, an automatic brain response. As soon as she turns away she can’t recall the grotesque image. And yet, somehow that is worse, the aftermath at the peril of her imagination for years to come.

Hank emits a low, choked moan. “The picture...I found it. Small world.”

“You show it to Sid?”

Hank shakes his head.

She digs the old photo out of his pocket and throws it into the fire, where its faded colors melt away. Corners curl up. Sparks pop. In a few seconds the photo is nothing more than a black, ashy rectangle. Hank, sweat on his face, betrayal in his eyes.

“Sorry,” she says. Doesn’t look like the Subaru’s going to make it out of the barn in one piece. She’ll drive the old truck parked near the house, assuming it even runs. Or

head out on foot. Bobby—she needs to get Bobby before Rooster does. She racks another shell into the shotgun.

Hank sucks in a breath, but she can't make out his words. He's messed up bad.

"I'll come right back," she promises.

Eden stumbles out of the barn and turns toward the house, but she runs straight into a bear hug. It squeezes the breath out of her. The shotgun clatters to the ground as she struggles to no avail. Rooster's eyes flicker in the flames of the burning barn.

"Been a while," he says.

CHAPTER 40

This time, when the Trans Am lunges forward, Sid pulls into the other lane and tap-tap-taps the brakes. Amos moves parallel with the Buick. For a moment Sid considers the pistol, the .45 he took from that deputy. One shot would clear his path. He drives the slide back, throwing a round in. Readies himself. Aims center mass, just like he was taught. But even with the car, the memories, he can't bring himself to do it—this isn't some paper target in basic training.

Amos shouts something, but it's lost in the rush of wind and roaring engines. Side by side they speed into a corridor of high ravines, pine trees surging on the hills. They're on the same patch of asphalt, Sid realizes, that he drove Eden and Bobby on earlier in the week. He knows this road better than Amos, and might be able to use that to his advantage. Specter-like clouds cloak the moon. The shoulder narrows to a half car width. A single mistake will land them in the scrubby growth; worst case, their demo cars wrapped around a spruce or white cedar, pine cones raining down on their bloody, fractured bodies.

Two signs flash by: NODAWAY RIVER and NODAWAY DAM. Sid foots his brake and swerves for the other car's hindquarters, trying to make Amos spin out. The Trans Am rushes forward, easily thwarting Sid's attack.

Can't outmaneuver him and can't outrace him. So: make it to the narrow bridge entrance first. Full bore until the wheels fall off. Amos will run out of room and be forced to slam on his brakes. Like a game of chicken. Sid fakes left, toward the passing lane, and when Amos bites he guns it and gets the Buick out on the shoulder.

The cars trade paint as they zip by a CAUTION: NARROW BRIDGE sign. Neither man backs down. The lane narrows into the mouth of the bridge. They hit the guardrails and Amos loses control as his Trans Am goes airborne, pirouetting over the bridge's wooden railing, equal parts graceful and clumsy.

Sid brakes hard—too hard, too late—and the Buick veers left but skids right, away from where Amos went off. The Buick piles up on its long side, trunk door breaking free of its weld points and popping open. Sid's hands remain on the pulsating steering wheel. Sparks and wood shavings hop around the compartment. For a moment, there are no sounds. No metal ruptures. No phone rattling around the glove box. No scream. Only silence and empty space and then Sid blacking out, falling down over the other side of the bridge and into the nothingness he's been seeking all these years.

CHAPTER 41

She sits on the lowest branch of a shagbark hickory, a tree near the shoreline. If you hadn't seen her leap up there, frightened by the cars colliding on the bridge and then careening off—one on the far side, the gaping ravine, and one on this side, into the dark, murky dam—if you hadn't caught her spring-loaded hop, you'd never know she was there. Looks like part of the hickory, a swollen burl or leafy bird's nest.

But zoom in. Moonlight kisses her, turning tawny fur light blue. Her shoulders, rippling with coiled, packed muscle. Peach nose twitches. Eyes gleam. The crash scared away any possible game: raccoons, possums, field mice, a rabbit up late into the night.

She scales down the tree. Moves along the moonlit shoreline, headed downriver, nose twitching. Something calling. Enticing. Her movement is instinctual, every small, quick, decisive turn and twist she takes to remain elusive.

Across the bridge now. A gravel buffer, then grass, sweet honeysuckle and her nose catches trails of wildflower nectar transpoed by honeybees hours ago, the same honeybees that thrum near the top of an elm tree along the creek. And in the ravine, close to the creek, there's a car on its back, a helpless turtle. She catches a familiar scent. Salty, flowing from the car. She slinks over and sniffs first. Unsheathes her claws and scratches a Roman numeral three into the upside-down driver's door. Hesitates. Her tongue laps, pensively at first, then more, more, until her short mandible drips red and her whiskers shine and her eyes light up and she leaves in a thrilled but controlled rush with a taste for human blood.

CHAPTER 42

Poetic ending: a demolition derby car becomes his coffin.

Why not?

Underwater, limited visibility, lungs burning, Sid fights to free himself from the Buick's grasp. The car sank fast; heavy, plus no windows to create an air pocket, to buoy him long enough to escape. Sank like a cinder block to the bottom of the dam.

He frantically jams his thumb into the seatbelt release button but nothing happens. Stuck. High above, flashes of moonlight hit the water's surface. He tries wriggling free of the seatbelt, getting up and over it, but something—the car, the universe, God—wants to keep him submerged. The water, cold and dark. This is it. A few gulps of water, burning lungs, and he'll be gone. He gives the seatbelt one final tug. No use.

And then his flashlight blinks on. Like a torch it divides the darkness, spotlighting the semi-auto on the floor, before the light blinks and disappears. The pistol should work underwater, though bullets only travel a few feet. If you shot someone submerged in a pool, it would only hurt about as bad as a punch to the chest. Still, it might do the trick up close. He aims it at the seatbelt coupling, deciding the angle carefully, and fires, a white jellyfish of air erupting. The shockwave tickles his thigh. Missed.

Darkness closes in around him like a camera aperture narrowing, nearly pushing him to his break point. Your brain, so intent on survival, won't physically let your

muscles swallow water until you reach your break point. It's like accepting death. Sleep approaches and nearly shuts his eyelids. Again he fires at the metal coupling.

It splinters, cracking just enough to pry out the male end. Sid casts aside the seatbelt tether and swims free of the Buick, kicking his legs desperately as the .45 slips away and drops down to the silty floor. He cuts through the surface, hands chopping like a paddleboat. The rush of oxygen nearly overwhelms him.

At the shore he hugs muddy banks, hooking an arm over an elm root. After catching his breath he pulls himself out of the water, feeling twenty pounds heavier. He retches. Tastes like dirt with a trace of pesticide runoff, and he hopes he didn't swallow too much. He removes his jacket, then his shirt. Wrings it out. Dumps about a pint of water out his boots, half expecting a couple minnows to wriggle out and flop on the ground. Pants off. When he rolls his socks off into little balls, his big toe throbs. It's discolored, a purplish hue along the knuckle, and curves awkwardly. Busted.

He stands naked and self-assesses. Leg stitches are okay. Still intact. Eden did a good job sewing him shut. Redressing, he finds once again that same baggie of meth, the one he lifted off Fritz in Comstock. Contents still dry. Huh.

On the other side of the bridge, the Trans Am still smolders. A small sense of relief, or closure, or *some* comforting feeling is quickly washed away when he realizes he's still no closer to finding the wheel man. It wasn't Amos. No way. It might have been Rooster, though that also seems unlikely. Still, finding the car does mean something, and Rooster will know how the car ended up in his junkyard. He tries to focus on that and not

the fact that Rooster may have ambushed Hank. No telling what went down until he gets there.

Sid points a finger toward the Big Dipper, tracing the handle's gentle curve until he finds a star with a soft orange glow. Arcturus. Northwest. On the road it would be about seventy-five miles, following the highway to the low maintenance road that leads to Hank's farmhouse, but he figures it's half that cutting straight through the countryside. Just gotta follow the stars. Could make it there by sunup—in the Air Force he ran a 5K in under twenty minutes. Wasn't so long ago, was it? Double-time, says his brain, though his body, bruised and tired, is inclined to disagree.

CHAPTER 43

Moths dive-bomb the porch lights, two upright 60-watt bulbs encased in a Mason jars. The insects' shadows, black and fluttery projections on the trailer's vinyl siding, are deceitful, making it seem like double the number. Yellow light from Rooster's Lincoln melts down the front of his trailer as he slinks in as close to the porch as he can. A few moths dogfight their way to the warm car.

Huh. Rooster figured Amos and Pepper would beat him back here. Did something go wrong? He kills the lights and pops the trunk, dragging his two captives inside. They struggle initially, until he pulls Eden down on a folding chair and binds her hands to the back legs with a stiff yellow cord, an old fish stringer with the needle removed. Bobby, seeing his mom subdued, stops trying to run off. Rooster sets the boy on his recliner.

"You should thank me for offing the derby driver," says Rooster. "He found out about the Trans Am...what do you think he'd do next?"

"Kill me," says Eden, hair frazzled, green eyes glazed, struggling with her binds. "Same as you."

"Would I bring you all the way back here if I was going to kill you? I'm giving you a chance to do the right thing here. Me and Zeke, that was self-defense. I'm a good person, you know. I go to church on occasion."

"You're a real saint."

Rooster blinks. Rubs his whiskers. "At least give me the ironic nature of killing him with the same car. That's something, is it not?" He glances at the boy, who has his

eyes locked on the living room floor. Hands folded in lap. Shirt collar stretched out. He's feeling the curve of his thumb with his fingers, running up and down repeatedly.

"Leave him alone," says Eden.

Rooster stomps his foot, shaking the entire trailer "Whatchu got there, son?"

"My hitchhiker thumb," says Bobby.

"Leave him alone, dammit!"

If she won't shut up, he'll shut her up. He locates a handkerchief, blue paisley print, and gags her, a laborious process because she won't hold her head still. Finally he finishes, double knot cinched tight. Eden screams into her gag and rocks in her chair, struggling against her binds. Tendons in her neck pull tighter than guitar strings.

Rooster says, "Some people were trying to keep us apart, Bobby, but don't you worry. I went ahead and took care of both of 'em." He stands. "Why don't you take a look around? This is fixin' to be your new home." Rooster nods toward the bookshelf. "Encyclopedia Britannica. Can learn a lot from these old books. My old man's set, soon to be yours. Well, not too soon, I hope."

But Bobby's more interested in arrowheads resting on the books than the books themselves. He picks one up and gingerly puts an index finger to the tip, testing sharpness. It isn't pointy enough to break his skin.

"Those are real," Rooster assures him. "Indians designed them to be just sharp enough to penetrate animal hide. Then they work their way further in on account of that hilt there. Call it side notched. You see them cowboy movies where the guy yanks an arrow out of his buddy's leg? Never happen."

Bobby doesn't seem to be listening, so Rooster draws his revolver. "Kid. You want to hold my gun or what?"

CHAPTER 44

At night everything appears in black and white. Dark sky poked with brilliant stars; black trees interrupted with white fields. Sid struggles up a muddy hill, birch trees sticking out on the crest offering handholds. Time and time again he stumbles in the dark, various wounds complaining, urging him to stop, rest. His big toe, puffy now, aches with every step. His leg stitches burn. Breathing is much more difficult with bruised ribs, and the sharp pain with each inhalation makes him wonder if one or two isn't cracked.

He keeps moving. His wet clothes dry out, but before long they're re-drenched with sweat. He learns to let his momentum carry him downhill, saving what little energy he has left for the climb. The jostling hurts, but it's a lot quicker.

Eventually all the water leeches from his system. His lips dry and crack open, split down the middle. Back in basic training, his MTI said every trainee had to drink seven canteens daily. Charts hung above each urinal, helpful guides that resembled a paint swatch and illustrated what color their piss should be. It ranged from pale yellow (optimal) to russet brown (seek medical assistance). Trainees kept their canteens on a web belt and if, during an inspection, a canteen was discovered half empty, their MTI went off. Thus, no one in Sid's flight drank any of their water. Better, they reasoned, to thirst and keep the canteen full at all times, thirst be damned, for you never knew when an inspection would occur. This was summertime in Lackland AFB, San Antonio, a hundred degrees in the shade. Military logic.

He forages through a field, searching for pilot weed. You can pluck a skeletonized stalk, peel the bark, and chew the pith. People have been doing it for centuries. Might

gather enough saliva to stave off thirst, at least for a while. But the field is all ironweed and hog millet—nothing of use.

Stars begin to all look alike. He leans against a maple tree. No landmarks in sight. No corn silos, barns, ag buildings of any sort; no farmland; no trails; only a sea of disorienting darkness. Thumbing a ride doesn't seem like such a bad idea anymore, but he doubts he could even find his way back to the highway.

Sliding down to the base of the tree, Sid closes his eyes. A barn owl who-whos. Further out coyotes yip, a pack caught in a hunger frenzy. A campfire smell stings his nose, but he must be imagining it. He could set up some bivouac shelter, though it would have to consist of branches and leaves, and the energy expended would be lost movement toward the farmhouse.

Still, rest feels inevitable. An hour or so, just until the sun comes up. Some argue that sleep after a concussion is okay, even a healing opportunity for the brain. Others disagree, fearing a subdural hematoma: the accumulation of blood in the outer meninges around the brain. Let that blood pool long enough and it'll compress your brain against your skull, killing you in your sleep.

He aches everywhere—the violence of grief has worn down his body over time. During his Air Force tenure he was in peak physical condition, but his muscles have atrophied after so many years behind the wheel, distributing and receiving blow after blow after blow. But he's never had so much trouble focusing his mind before.

He digs the meth baggie out of his pocket. Might dehydrate him more—Sid’s a little unclear what the drug’s effects actually are—but it would probably make him forget about the pain. Focus him. In a way, it would be stupid *not* to try it out.

If Jess could see him now... He closes his eyes and pictures her. Every curve of her face. The way her voice caught when she’d been crying. The style of her movements. Fine white hairs on her cheekbones. How she always mispronounced “jewelry” and “clothes.” The tapestry of her naked body. Her feet propped up on the dash just before they crashed. All those things you take for granted at the time, things he shoves aside daily in order to plow forward.

From the darkness, he hears a low growl. Eyes gleam, multiple sets, under the moonlight. He smells the wet fur, hears their labored breath. At first Sid thinks he stumbled across some midnight hunting party, men and their dogs out treeing raccoons or possums or some other furbearer.

“Don’t shoot,” he says, wheezing, dropping the small bag of meth. “Help me.”

He moves closer and so do the animals. Their eyes shine dull yellow, silhouettes revealing large triangular ears and long, tapered muzzles. Grayish-brown fur. With their front paws they dig anxiously in the dirt, moving closer and closer. Maybe a half dozen creatures in the field with Sid. Not hunting dogs; dogs that hunt. Ten yards out; five yards; fourth and inches. *Canis latrans*. Coyote.

CHAPTER 45

Blinking, Bobby accepts the present from Rooster. Initially the weight fools him—he's probably used to lightweight dart guns. The boy two-hands the pistol, pointing at discolored linoleum squares in the kitchen, then takes aim at the refrigerator. The upper-deck freezer door wears various pro-hunting and -trapping bumper stickers and magnets, things like HOWL IF YOU LIKE TRAPPING COYOTES and a HUNT IOWA magnet with antlers sprouting from the O, which itself is a practice target. Items picked up over the years at flea markets and gun shows. Bobby peers down the sights, lining up his shot on the various door decorations.

“Do it,” says Rooster.

The words break Bobby's concentration. He cocks his head at Rooster.

“Nothing in there but last year's ground turkey. Go ahead. I can trade one of those lemons out there for a new fridge. Squeeze one off.”

Bobby re-aims, holding the gun dangerously close to his open eye. Rooster leans in and thumbs the hammer back, stretches the gun out properly.

“Watch that the recoil don't bust your eye all to hell,” he says.

The boy nods. He licks his lips and plants his feet. The oven clock burns off a minute, then two. Rooster frowns. Amos should've been here ages ago. Is he still upset about the retirement home incident? And why hasn't Pepper at least called?

“Look at you,” says Rooster, roused from his thoughts.

Bobby grips the .357 so tight his little hands turn the color of a ghost. He doesn't close one eye, just sort of half squints both, aiming right for Rooster's chest.

“Now just what do you think you’re gonna do with—”

The kid grimaces and pulls back on the trigger. Nothing happens, save a metallic click.

Rooster laughs and pulls the pistol away from Bobby and opens the cylinder, showing him six empty circles. Sends the chambers spinning like a roulette wheel. When it stops, he laughs some more, pulling a box of bullets from a cabinet and sliding them into the .357.

Bobby’s face reddens. Turning his head down, he flees to Eden.

“Now I know where we stand,” says Rooster. “We got some work to do, me and you. We gotta build trust.”

CHAPTER 46

Coyotes usually hunt solo. Sometimes as a pair, male and female—they mate for life. When they want to take down bigger game, however, they hunt in groups. Work well together. Coordinate their attacks. Reaching speeds of 40 mph, they can take down a whitetail buck if they need food badly enough. A bruised, bloody, recumbent adult human doesn't pose much of a threat.

Sid counts seven in all. They're about the size of border collies, forty or fifty pounds at the heaviest, but their grayish-brown fur is mangled, chewed up, making Sid wonder if a few aren't rabid like that one Hank claimed he saw lurking around the farmhouse. Their hot, stinking breath pours over Sid as they pace back and forth, circling him. What he wouldn't give to have that .45 back right about now.

“Get out of here!” he says, trying to rise.

The alpha male leads the attack, testing the potential prey by running up and biting Sid's calf. Forty-two teeth, including four long incisors that pierce and sting. Sid worsens the bite by thrashing his leg, kicking the coyote away. The defensive maneuver only seems to embolden them—jaws clack and another smaller coyote runs in, though he misses wide left.

“Mad dog,” says Sid, and he laughs, wheezing like a poked balloon. “Mad dog.”

Most demolition derby events offer money for top placing, but a few throw some extra cash to the craziest, zaniest, all-out-est car on the track: the guy or gal who runs with a chip on their shoulder, who smashes into vehicles with reckless abandon. There's a trick to it, of course—you have to be good (or lucky) enough to stay in the race and be

noticed. Big hits will grab the crowd's attention, but you also run the risk of wrecking your car. Early in his demo career, that was the only money Sid received. A quick cost/benefit analysis showed he was getting pennies to the dollar, and although people appreciate a mad dog, they remember a winner. Still, there's a time and place for everything.

Sid props himself up on all fours. He yells and charges the pack, flailing his arms, shaking his head back and forth. Like a mad dog driver, only concerned with putting on a hell of a show. The coyotes are surprised, ears pinned back, eyes wide. One of Sid's swinging hands clutches fur. It's sewed on tight, lean and muscular beneath. The warmth surprises him. He reaches his mouth in, opening wide, and clamps down on the coyote's leg. Clenches. Hard.

The coyote yelps and pulls away from Sid, who spits out fur, skin, and a bloody, strawberry-like pulp. The confusion of combat sets in. Sid runs as hard as he can toward the pack, stumbling, swearing and wheezing. The coyotes race into the tree line and down a steep ravine. Sid's feet cut out from under him and he falls headfirst, tucking into an ugly roll. Each somersault is a new sensation, a new way to hurt. When he hits the muddy bottom he sits up and curls his fists, waiting for an attack that never arrives. His chest heaves in and out. The woods fall silent again.

CHAPTER 47

The phone rings. Finally.

“Pepper, where the hell are you?”

“Bridge on Highway 34. Where are you?”

“Huh. I came across 34 earlier. Two ships passing in the night.”

“Bad news, Rooster. Guy got away from us at the derby, so Amos and I took off after him. Amos in that Trans Am, me in my squad car.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I must’ve zipped right by them the first time. They had a good head start. Wasn’t till I doubled back...”

“Spit it out, Pepper.”

“Amos Attridge is dead. Half in the car, half out. Pretty messy, and this ain’t my first rodeo. Looks like some scavenger had their way with him before I arrived. Crows lining the trees as we speak.”

“And—” Rooster has to swallow before he can finish. “What about Sid? Where is he?”

CHAPTER 48

The sun begins to rise behind him as he reaches the far side of the ravine. He rolls up his pant leg, wondering if he ever got a rabies vaccine when he was enlisted. Certainly they poked him with enough needles—in basic, his flight marched single file through the hospital, where nurses on both sides poked them. An assembly line of needles and men.

Up ahead, maybe a half mile or so, he spots something manmade sticking up above the treetops. A windmill. Its blades turn slowly, catching the morning light. That's it. The first landmark with any significance. Relief washes over him.

Pushing through thick pines, soft but scratchy, he finds the low maintenance road, lumpy with rocks and hardened mud clumps. Just another quarter mile or so to the farmhouse. He smiles, but it quickly evaporates. Smoke trails line the sky over Hank's place. That campfire smell from before. Sid races down the road, kicking dirt clods into the cattail-fringed ditches.

The barn's four corner posts, telephone poles Hank bought at a county auction, are as scorched as used matchsticks. They've fallen together in a makeshift teepee, ashes and warm embers flaking off. The tractor's body remains, smoldering, but the Subaru's body is flattened. His Imperial, completely melted—no sign of it anywhere. No Hank, either.

Then he sees the body. Sid moans, his legs woozy. Looks like a roast someone forgot in the oven. Flames have burned through his shirt and pants, melted the skin and fat and muscle off his femur and tibia. Something near his midsection hisses and pops

like bonfire coals. A long white cord emerges from below his knee, fibula bone exposed all the way to his shin.

Why Hank? He was one those few people who genuinely thought mankind could reverse course, better itself. Sid's fists curl involuntarily. A shotgun or two oughta do it. He makes his way toward the house when something around back, perched under the clothesline, catches his eye.

There it is. A beauty. Morning sunlight hits her just right. The Chrysler Imperial restored to its glory days, back when it ruled the road. Her savior in the driver's seat.

"Thank God," says Sid, running to the car.

"Thank God," repeats Hank. His rests on the steering wheel. Sweat droplets put a shine on his face and the vein on his forehead pulsates. Voice is a shell of its usual power. Yet through the visible pain, he laughs. "*Thank God*. Knew I'd make a believer outta you."

"Bible thumper."

"Flyboy."

"Nope, grounded for life. Guess the Chrysler's running again, huh?"

"Who'd've known."

"Eden and Bobby?"

"Took 'em back to Heritage. Had a helper, big fella, but I took care of him."

"You okay?"

"*You* okay?"

Sid helps him out of the Imperial, arm over arm. “Long story.” He jogs to the backyard hydrant and fills a small bucket with water. First he drains it, quenching his own thirst, then brings a bucketful to Hank.

“We best be leaving.” He coughs as he drinks the water, entire frame trembling. Leans against the Imperial for support. “Cops in Heritage will shoot to kill, or so said the big fella in the barn. Got you run up on a string of charges. Not sure if they’ll come all the way up here, but I’m not sticking around to find out.”

“I know,” says Sid, grinding his teeth. Plus there’s Amos. Wouldn’t take much for the local cops to pin that one on him as well. Manslaughter at best. “You leaking bad?”

“Got lucky. No organs, soft tissue. Passed right through me.”

“Lucky all right. What next?”

“Those in my line of work would call this a sign.” Hank nods toward the carport. “I’ll take the old Chevy, head west. Hope to reach Colorado Springs by nightfall.”

“The Academy?”

Hank shrugs, trying to downplay his disappointment. Sid feels bad for the old-timer. A man, any man, can only run for so long. Sooner or later he’ll have to fess up to his own limited abilities. Could be the old retiree might welcome good news.

“I found the car, Hank. The Trans Am. I finally did it.”

“So it’s over?”

“Soon. I gotta go back.”

“What for?”

“Rooster knows who was driving that day, I’m sure of it.”

“Hell,” says Hank, his shoulders dropping further. “You know that old saying about how you shouldn’t meet your heroes? They won’t ever measure up to the way we lionize them. The same goes for the villains in our lives. They’re just...”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“They don’t measure up either, kid. Villains are just ordinary people who make a wrong turn somewhere along the road. Instead of doubling back, they keep on keeping on.”

“Okay. I’m lost.”

“Eden. She was driving the car that day, Sid. Wasn’t paying attention to the road, just some dumb mistake she made. Just some dumb kid making some dumb mistake. How are we any different?”

Sid doesn’t say anything. In a way it feels like he suspected this, down in his very core, for a long time. Since they met at the bar. Maybe that’s hindsight, but the feeling’s palpable. The feeling is a fist gripping his heart. It tells him to see things through, all the way to the bloody end. “Gonna need a shotgun, Hank. Some shells too. You got the keys to the gun cabinet?”

“I trust you to do the right thing. Always have.”

“Hank, come on. No sermonizing.”

“The gun for Rooster or Eden? Or yourself?”

“Give me the keys.”

“It won’t bring them back.”

“Keys.”

Hank turns over the old motor in the Chevy, a raspy throat-clear as spark plugs fire and old diesel swims through veins. Belts snake around the crankshaft with multiple thumps, engine loud enough Hank has to speak up when he says, “I left it unlocked.”

CHAPTER 49

The handkerchief tastes like sweat. Eden fights back her gag reflex as she grips the arrowhead Bobby slipped her. It's a legit arrowhead, probably dug up in some quarry or basin, its edges jagged but dull, like a serrated butter knife—not intended to saw through anything firmer than white bread. Nevertheless, she works it back and forth across the fish stringer. The yellow rope, likely submerged most its life, has turned brittle, but she can't get the right angle with her hands behind her back. The stringer refuses to fray.

Bobby's in the bathroom; she hears the slow trickle of his urine stream. Rooster's distracted, pulling all the blinds back, peering out each window. He scowls at her, turning off all the lights save the living room lamp, then heads back through the kitchen and into the taxidermy room at the far end of the trailer.

Gripping the arrowhead like a guitar pick, Eden continues to work. The bathroom sink handles squeak and water sputters out. Bobby's washing his hands just like she taught him, humming a full verse of "Happy Birthday" to time himself.

Suddenly Rooster appears in front of her. Busted. He yanks off the disgusting handkerchief. "This guy, he's coming back to kill you. You're lucky to have me, Eden."

"Sure I am." Behind her, Eden feels the cords weaken. She straightens her back, struggling for a better angle of attack, trying to keep the sawing motion hidden.

"Mom?"

When Bobby finishes up, Rooster leads the boy into the taxidermy room. Tools rattle around. Liquid splashes from one container to the next. She overhears him telling

Bobby about the art of taxidermy. Words and phrases sneak out: “carcasses,” “tanning hide lessons,” “antler mounting.” Adrenaline courses through her. As she saws, a piercing pain works its way from between her shoulder blades to the tip of her spine. The trailer lights grow brighter and it’s not just the progression of morning. Her head dizzies. Eden bites her lower lip and pushes, *pushes*, until finally a cord frays, twisting apart, and then her binds sever completely.

“Bobby,” says Eden, arising. Her feet tremble like there’s an earthquake rocking the trailer. She takes a big gulp of air, steadies herself.

“Just a minute, Mom.”

Sometimes Eden wonders what it would have been like had Bobby taken to Zeke. Heartbreaking, certainly, but also fearful; that her son might end up in the same kind of trouble as her and Zeke scares her.

“Bobby,” she says again, moving closer to the doorway.

“He’s busy!”

And then there’s Rooster. What happened in his life to make him so angry? So willing to bend or break the roles of society? Maybe something when he was as young and impressionable as Bobby is right now. Maybe it’s too late already.

“Bobby, please.”

Rooster, still around the corner in the taxidermy room, sighs big and loud. “Go see what she wants, boy.”

When Bobby appears in the doorway, she whisks him behind her back. She grips the arrowhead. Rooster has his pistol, but she has the element of surprise. That’ll have to

count for something. Can't break for the door—he'd gun them down just like he did Zeke. Better off waiting until he pops his head around the corner.

Suddenly, a light flashes. There's a loud rumbling outside the trailer. Growl of an engine. Spray of gravel. A tornado-like rush of wind. Eden peers around the corner as the taxidermy room explodes, far wall crumbling into a mixture of wood and plaster and glass and chains and animal pelts and traps.

The .357 scatters past the linoleum and into the living room. Something heavy and growly and pulsating overpowers Rooster, throwing him to the ground and consuming him. Eden blinks once, twice, staring dead straight into the four cylindrical headlamps of Sid's Chrysler Imperial.

CHAPTER 50

Sid, body crumpled and bruised, staggers out of the Imperial. His jaw aches. A tinny whine in his left ear. A spilled bucket of formaldehyde makes the trailer smell like pickles. A mounted red fox and a hawk and a river otter sprinkle the car's hood, the fox upside down, grin turned into a frown. Above their heads, the light blinks on and off, aggravating Sid's headache. The car crash shuffled around the electrical wiring; in the kitchen, the microwave beeps.

"We could've been in there, you know," says Eden, an edge to her voice.

He stands up straight, facing her. "Maybe I was hoping you were."

And right then she realizes she's been had: Sid can see it in her eyes. He grips the shotgun's handle, levels it at her.

"It'd be awful fitting to run you down with this car." The shotgun remains bull's-eyed on her heart. "Tell me it wasn't you."

"It was an accident," Eden says, and recounts her involvement. Step by step. She doesn't sugarcoat anything. Yes, she was under the influence, not paying attention, hit their back bumper, drove off without much regard.

Sid played this moment in his head a hundred times. What he would say, what he would do, how it would feel. His finger curls around the shotgun's trigger. All those miles traveled and he's finally at the end of the road. Finally. The shotgun explodes in his hands and jerks up, buckshot starbursting the blinking light fixture on the ceiling. Glass rains down. He screams.

When his voice dies out, Eden is still looking at him. "Why not?" she asks.

He lowers the shotgun, the barrel of which is still smoking. “It won’t bring them back. Nothing will.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry.”

“If I’d’ve just—”

“No.” He cuts her off because there’s nothing she can do, then or now, to make things right. And Sid—he stomped the brake pedal too hard. Much to blame as anyone. He brushes his free hand along the Chrysler’s still-warm hood. Pictures Tabby in the back, Jess up front, feet propped against the dash. Nothing good to say about that day. About the tenure of their time together, not much either. He has a few moments pocketed away, like when her belly swelled with new life, crying about getting old, so old, slipping back into her French, *je suis trop vieux pour ce monde*, him playing one of her dumb records and asking her to dance: a fleeting moment when he made her feel young again. Those are the moments he wants to live inside not forever, but one more time.

Under the Imperial, Rooster groans. He elbow-crawls out, scraping against busted glass and chunks of the demolished wall. Sid digs a boot heel into the small of his back, pinning him to the floor. The same motion one might use to crush a spider.

“Bobby,” says Eden.

Sid realizes he should probably sit down—as his adrenaline wears off, wooziness increases. It feels like he’s at the apex of a tall rollercoaster, waiting to rush forward, hands held high in the air.

“Bobby,” says Eden again, quieter this time. “Put it down.”

Finally Sid catches on: the boy's holding a pistol, silver and long-barreled. .357, hammer cocked back. Tears rolls down Bobby's face. The gun, aimed at Rooster's head, trembles in his hands. Sid notices that the boy's thumbs are crossed, just like he taught him.

"He said he was my dad," says Bobby, spitting tears and saliva strands. "I don't want him to be my dad."

Sid sets his shotgun on the Imperial's front seat and raises his arms, palms forward. He removes his boot from Rooster's back. "Listen, kid," begins Sid.

"I'm not a kid!" Bobby's eyes—dark like Rooster's, Sid notes, and not green like his mom's—grow wider and wider, the size of hardboiled eggs, lined with red veins. His jaw is clenched, lips dry and cracked and spread apart on his teeth.

"Fair enough." Sid kneels down in front of Bobby, face to face, and holds out his hand. Bobby waivers but doesn't relent, still aiming the gun right at Rooster's head. "You can't shoot him, though." Sid's hand inches closer to the gun's barrel. "If everyone got what they deserved, the world would be a lot smaller place."

The .357 shakes in Bobby's hands. Sweat and tears drip off his chin and splash onto the faux wood floor, mixing with the spilled formaldehyde. The whole place smells briny. Eden moves behind Bobby, preparing to scoop him up, but Sid shakes his head. He can talk the kid down.

"Bobby," he says gently.

The barrel lowers. So does Bobby's head. Sid takes the gun and, thumbing the hammer back down carefully, pitches it outside, up and over his Chrysler Imperial. It makes a soft thump in the patchy grass.

Eden sighs relief. She leans over and hugs Bobby, who returns her embrace.

"Let's get out of here," says Sid.

"What do we do with Rooster?" asks Eden.

"Hogtie him. Leave him for the buzzards or the cops, whoever shows up first."

"Hold it right there," says a voice from the trailer's new opening.

Sid wheels around. The cop from the Dogwood derby walks out from behind the Imperial, kicking over pink insulation strips and crumbling drywall with his shiny black boots. Deputy John Pepper. His bald head gleams. He has a .45 pointed right at Sid.

CHAPTER 51

“Well, well,” says the deputy, licking his lips. Eden recognizes him as a new police officer, one who frequented Goldschmidt’s Café, always asking if Rooster was around.

“About time you got here,” says Rooster, wincing as he stands up. Glass tinkles to the floor. Beneath his shirt, the tail of which he burritos gingerly, a purple and yellow bruise blooms on his lower ribcage. Rooster pokes the bruise, his body involuntarily jumping away from his own touch. Then he casually leans over and punches Eden in the nose.

The attack surprises her; she anticipated most of Rooster’s wrath would be directed toward Sid. Bobby shrieks. She steps back and puts a hand up to the rubbery cartilage, blood dotting her fingers. Pain signals rush to her brain as she crumples to the floor, Bobby by her side, hugging her leg.

“What the hell are you doing?” yells Pepper, struggling to hold Sid back.

The lights blink on and off again, but Eden’s unsure whether it’s electrical issues or her brain surging. She pinches her nostrils closed, trying to stop the bleeding.

“Had it coming,” says Rooster. “All that and more. Give me the paper, the document. She’ll say this guy’s the one who shot Zeke. I mean, he *was*, but now we’ll have it on record, so when you shoot him it’ll tie everything up in a neat bow.”

“You want me to shoot him?”

“Yeah. He was supposed to be dead already.”

“Maybe you think I’m stupid,” says Pepper, “but I know what’s going on here. You’re soft on her. She’ll talk and ruin the whole thing.”

“So what? We’ll have a sworn statement plus witnesses when the rest of my crew gets here. Sid killed Zeke and ran off with his wife and kid. Then he crashed into my trailer high as a kite. Here, dope him up before you kill him.” Rooster tosses Pepper a small, tied-off baggy. “Don’t worry about the woman. Time I get through with her, she’ll know her place.”

Pepper flinches. “What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Eden blinks in and out of consciousness for a few moments as the two men bicker. The deputy handcuffs Sid’s arms behind his back and leads him out the door. Gone.

“Well, here we are again. One big happy family,” says Rooster. “Eden, you’ve got an essay to write.”

“I don’t think so.”

He smiles, winks at her, and retrieves from the mess of a back room the following items: rubbing alcohol, an orange pill bottle, Borax, epoxy glue, and a spool of 18 gauge straight wire. Eden slows her breathing as Rooster lists off each items and explains its purpose. Concentrate, she tells herself. Focus on getting out of here. Nothing is impossible.

“The Borax dehydrates the skin, stretching it out across the bone. Preserves it. Then I toss whatever in this here pill bottle.” He holds up the bottle for her to see. “I

always cut off toes first—more discreet. If we still have problems after that, I work my way up the body.”

Eden tastes blood in her mouth. Her heart plays a drum solo in her chest. She watches helplessly as Rooster ties Bobby to the folding chair.

“Now where did I put those things?” Rooster grabs a drawer in the kitchen but it catches, opening only halfway. Sid’s crash jostled the wall separating the kitchen from the taxidermy room. The cupboards sit askew and the fridge no longer hums. Rooster swears, yanking the drawer free. A metallic chorus rings out as utensils fall onto the linoleum floor.

After a quick search he displays the tool he was searching for: pliers with a sharp, beak-like mouth. “Some people use rib cutters—old surgical tool. Cut through the bone like butter. I like the diagonal pliers, though. Nothing beats a trusty pair of dikes.”

Eden shudders. She loses control of her body—she’s in shock, aware of that fact, but unable to do anything about it. Arms, legs, refuse to fight. Ten feet away, Bobby rocks in his chair until it tips over. Eden shrieks as he falls backward, arms still bound, and smacks his head on the floor.

“Passed right out,” remarks Rooster, waving a hand in front of Bobby’s face. “He’ll be okay.”

He kneels down and grabs Eden’s leg, wrenches her shoe off. “The wire is important. I prefer to buy it at Spencer’s Supplies. No Farm & Fleet or Orschelen’s or Wal-Mart for me. This is 18 gauge—small enough to work through paws and legs and tails, but strong enough to hold. It doesn’t usually come spooled, but Spencer’s has it on

stock. Ten bucks for twenty-five feet. The wire is used to form the toe—otherwise it'll look saggy, droopy. I made that rookie mistake years ago. There's just not much a spool of wire won't take care of. You wanna get a squirrel upright, run some length up his back. Bird midflight? Sew that wire all the way across their wingspan." The jaw of the wire-cutters open. Rooster turns the tool over, staring as if he's never seen it before.

"Someday I'll get the tail of a mountain lion in a perfect curve."

"Go to hell," says Eden.

Rooster's front teeth pop out as he smiles.

CHAPTER 52

Inside the fenced junkyard are derby classics like Bonneville's, Crown Vics, Parisiennes, Maximas, even a Skylark frame sitting on cinder blocks. Forget-me-nots from the 90s that have long been forgotten: an Acura NSX with a crushed windshield underneath a Supra, cherry red, missing both doors. Compact trucks, full-size trucks, heavy duty trucks. Some stacked, some not. Most with defects: windshields of spiderwebbed glass, donut tires, cockeyed bumpers. Sid, prodded along by the business end of Pepper's service weapon, spies an alleyway from the gate to the back of the junkyard, where a small crop duster rests. He wonders if he could fly it. Cruising through the clouds, he's heard, is the easy part. Takeoffs and landings are what kill you.

"Hurry up," says Pepper, poking the barrel into the small of Sid's back.

"Guess you got a new .45."

"Yeah. Still need to break it in."

They march parallel with the fence until coming to the enclosure's corner, where a dented corner post reroutes the chain link ninety degrees. A few trees jut from the hill that rolls away from Rooster's junkyard. Behind the base of a sugar maple, a black spout hangs out. As they circle the tree Sid notices a fifteen-quart oil drain pan, the kind you get for five bucks at Wal-Mart. It has a handle on one side and a spout on the other. Piled up on top are meat byproducts, but instead of pink flesh and white bones and tendons, they glisten green. Only after Sid notices the odd color does he catch the stink.

Pepper shakes his head. "Small-town Iowa..." He places a boot under the handle and overturns the pile of animal parts.

The smell spirals even as Pepper kicks dirt over the mess. Coolant. Sid would recognize it anywhere. Sweet green liquid that he associates with many other smells: hot oil draining, gasoline-soaked rags, mildew from the soggy pages of an owner's manual.

Sid tenses up, preparing to charge the deputy. He doesn't have much of a plan. Lower his head, butt Pepper like a billy goat, and go from there. Figure out a way to get those handcuff keys. He widens his stance.

Pepper catches his movement. "Relax, tough guy. I'm not going to shoot you." He pulls Sid behind the tree and tells him to sit down. As Sid complies, Pepper takes cover behind the sugar maple and positions his pistol to cover the driveway out in front of Rooster's trailer.

"The hell?" says Sid.

"Quiet," says Pepper. "This will all be over soon."

Pepper's voice has changed—he no longer sounds dopey, incompetent. "Holy..." Sid shakes his head. "You're undercover. What are you? Federal? State?"

"DCI," says Pepper. "Been after this guy eighteen months. By now he's moving a pound a week easy, way we figure it. That's ten grand even if you don't know what you're doing. More if you do." Pepper takes out two extra clips and puts them in his front left pants pocket. He checks his ankle gun, a diminutive Ruger .380. "Starts in Heritage County and works its way out. Rooster's got a sweet deal, selling wholesale. Not as sweet of a reward since buyers pay more as you go down the food chain. But a very low risk. Would've had him, too, except he's got his hands so deep in Heritage County's pockets

you can't tell where he ends and they begin. People like him can't exist unless they have help from dirty cops. Bust like this might seem like much, but it sets a precedent."

"So uncuff me. In case you didn't notice, I want him as bad as you."

Pepper laughs. "He's going down, don't you worry. Whoever shows up here next, his so-called crew, locus of conspiracy. And you? We'll let forensics figure out if you killed Zeke Hartz. I'm guessing not, though I've stopping being surprised at this case. Outside of that you're still looking at vehicular manslaughter. Amos Attridge is dead. Plus one of those two punks you beat up in Comstock was only seventeen—assault on a minor. Given the circumstances I'll ignore the assault-on-an-officer-of-the-law charge at the derby. I'm still working out how you got involved in all this mess, what your connection is."

"If you figure it out," says Sid, "be sure to let me know."

"Don't worry, I will. You can join Rooster and his cop buddies at their arraignment in Des Moines."

A high-pitched scream issues from inside the trailer.

"We gotta go help her," says Sid.

Pepper turns around, studies Sid, hesitates. He says, "Five minutes. My backup's not exactly waiting in an electrician's van up the road. We wait for them to get here."

"Five minutes? She could be dead."

"Doubt he'll kill her. Anyway, acceptable loss. She's a meth head. You know that, right? Almost had her kid taken away once."

"That was her husband's fault."

“I read the report. A little more reliable than the word of a tweaker, don’t you think?”

“People change,” says Sid. He can’t believe he’s already defending Eden. Went from wanting her dead to defending her honor in ten minutes flat.

“Change? Recidivism rates tell a different story.”

Another scream. Sid can’t stand it. If Pepper wants to stop him, he’ll have to put him down. Sid arises.

Pepper moves sideways to block Sid and screams. A bloodcurdling yell, almost muffling the metallic slam of a bear trap’s spiked jaws clamping down on his ankle, felling him like a cut tree. He timbers onto the grass, arterial spray a thin fountain arcing three feet high. A chain of a dozen links pulls slack, holding him from rolling away. Sid tries kicking the trap out of the ground, but the attached spike is anchored deep in the clay soil.

“Give me the keys!” he yells.

Pepper gurgles. His face grows white. Blood puddles at his quivering feet. Sid rolls on his side, back to Pepper. Again, he yells for the handcuff keys. He hears them jingling as Pepper’s shaky hand brings them over and pops one wrist free. That’s all Sid needs.

He has to work fast.

Sid steps on two cast-iron Vs on either side of the trap’s mouth. They’re ringed at the top, fitted so you can only open the trap by applying pressure to both simultaneously. He works the pin into place, resetting the trap and sliding it off Pepper’s ankle. Blood

squirts from multiple gashes. Sid wrenches his belt off like he's drawing a sword, then wraps it above the deputy's knee. CPR training rushes back to him. A tourniquet, left on for any good amount of time, almost surely means amputation of that limb. But it could also save Pepper's life.

Sure enough, his bleeding slows down. A good sign, or it could mean his pulse is lowered. Heart's about to fold. Sid rips off the lower half of his shirt and does his best to wrap the wound with blood-soaked, sticky fingers. The handcuffs, still adhered to one wrist, clang together as he works. He pops them loose with the key.

"Hey," says Sid, slapping Pepper's cheek.

Pepper doesn't respond. Sid rolls a tree branch over and slides it under Pepper's leg for elevation. Not much more he can do at this point. He takes the .45 and begins making his way toward the trailer, where things are quiet now. Too quiet.

CHAPTER 53

“I don’t want him to see,” says Eden. Both of her pinkie toes, severed and capped with a gooey red, lie on the kitchen counter. Blood runs from her feet, red yarn unraveled. Phantom pain shoots all the way out to her toenails every time she glimpses at her removed appendages.

“He’s not watching,” says Rooster.

Bobby’s still restrained in the chair, uprighted by Rooster, who’s correct: the boy’s had his eyes closed from the moment Rooster clamped down with the wire-cutters. Eden felt a pinch, then an emptiness with which she was unfamiliar. A piece of her, taken away. Rooster pulled out a handkerchief, dabbed her wounded foot, and started in on the other pinkie toe. It hurt. A lot.

“Turn him around,” says Eden. She’s doubled over, hands in her lap, her face cracked and bleeding from the various blows she’s received. Rooster didn’t even bother tying her up again. Whenever she tries to stand or resist, he knocks her back on the floor with a backhand slap or wicked jab. The man’s just too big and strong for her. Physically, she’s outmatched. Her will, broken. They both know it.

“A toe preserved in good condition can be reattached,” says Rooster, working on the counter. “Too bad my ice machine is broken.” After he rinses both pinkie toes off in the kitchen sink, he stuffs them into the orange pill bottle.

“Turn him around,” Eden says again, and she stands up.

Calmly but quickly, Rooster comes over and slaps her full across the mouth. His hand glows pink, but she figures her face looks worse. Eden slumps back down to the

floor, tasting blood, one of her incisors worked loose. Pain shoots throughout her gums. Yet she rises up again, facing Rooster.

“You’re like a June bug in July,” he says, shoving her back against the wall.

“Do it,” she says, “and I’ll sign the papers. Turn him.”

Eden grimaces, forcing herself to lock eyes with Rooster. She nods, and then her head falls. Her shirt is a canvas of blood. A fizzy sensation like ginger ale swarms over her feet and she wonders how long she can remain conscious.

“So be it.”

Rooster sets the pill bottle down. Phantom pains needle Eden, but she ignores them, concentrating on Rooster’s footsteps. The floorboards creak as he moves toward Bobby, his back toward her.

Eden stands, clumsily at first from blood loss and missing toes, but as she falls over she braces herself on the counter, gathering the spool of wire in her shaking hands. Before Rooster has a chance to react she’s behind him, stretching out the wire, twirling a loop around her palms for better grip, flipping the curved strand over his head like a miniature jump rope. When it falls across his neck she pulls.

Rooster gurgles, trying to work his fingers under the taut wire. He reaches back for Eden, pawing at her like an angry bear, but she lifts herself up by tugging on the wire and raising her knees into the small of his back.

His arms paddle through the air as he falls over, seeking purchase anywhere he can find. With a booming thud he hits the floor. He grasps for the front door rug, fingers tugging the braided tassels. It flaps as he chokes and spits and whispers first pleas, then

curses. Both fall on deaf ears. She has him and isn't letting go. Eden jams her knees into Rooster's back as she shifts her weight away from him.

"For Zeke," she says.

More gurgling. Whistling sounds as air escapes his nasal passageway. At last, his body goes slack. For a moment there is silence. Eden waits. She releases only when she's certain that Rooster's either passed out or dead. Some part of her hopes for the latter, but his back rises slowly as she rolls off him. Wheezing noises follow. Using the remaining wire, she binds his hands. A few times she stumbles—the pinkie toe's more stabilizing than she realized.

Eden finds a paper towel and wraps her pinkies in it. She places them in Rooster's freezer, which makes no sense—how will she ever get them sewn back on in time—but the self-preservation attempt keeps her lucid.

Although it's painful, she crams her feet back into her shoes. Should help with the bleeding. When she stands she discovers that it actually helps with the pain, too. She moves toward Bobby. It's safe now, she tells him. Mom will protect you, always. She wedges the .357 into her shorts. The hammer pinches her belly. They walk out of the trailer together, running headlong into Sid. His shirt is ripped and bloody.

"Behind you," he says, grimacing.

Rocks crunch in the driveway. Two squad cars pull up and park near the Imperial. Four men get out, only one in a police uniform. All four men carry pistols and one guy, wearing a blaze orange hat turned backward, also has a shotgun strapped to his shoulder.

They're poking their guns and heads into the trailer's new orifice. The man in the blaze orange hat shouts. He's spotted the three.

CHAPTER 54

Rooster writhes on the floor of his trailer, shouts and sounds above him like he's underwater and they're on the surface. Nothing makes sense. Images come to him blurred, streaked with motion. His neck hurts. His hands, bound, are freed. The Larsen brothers stand over him—he recognizes them, at least. Their faces show no sign of concern, but rather, as true opportunists, they beam subtly with the realization that Rooster's in big trouble and if they manage to save the day he'll owe them significantly.

“Are you okay?”

He tries to speak but it feels like he's been sucking on sandpaper for the past hour. No words form. Of course I'm not okay, he wants to tell him. Disoriented, he tries tracing his way back through the day. How did it end up so wrong?

“It's not deep,” says the first brother, scanning Rooster's neck.

“Voice box, you think?”

“Sure enough. Can't talk. Voice box's bruised.”

“Shee-yit.”

Brandon and Ira are there as well. Everyone's armed. No sign of his .357. In the kitchen the fridge door hangs open, longnecks and beer cans rolling around the trailer floor. Sounds begin to make sense again. Two Miller High Life bottles clink together, amber liquid sloshing sideways.

The other brother says, “Where's Pepper?”

Rooster blinks, mouth gaping. They've rolled him over on his back and pressed a t-shirt against his gashed neck. The cloth smells familiar. His own shirt. The ceiling light

looks like a fingerprint smudge, and then he realizes it's burnt out and his vision is hazy, filled with eye floaters. Light from the window streams in, haloing the Larsen brothers.

“Pepper,” says the same brother. “That guy, the new guy. Something doesn't check out.”

What? Rooster can't concentrate. What's this about Pepper? Isn't he outside, burying Sid's body? He chokes out as many coherent words as he's able: woman, boy. Outside. Go. Get. Them.

CHAPTER 55

Eden doesn't like their prospects. The cops, having even more to lose than Rooster, will kill all three of them. They might off Rooster too, make up some story about a drug deal gone awry. We were just in the right place at the right time, they'll say at the commendation ceremony. Who knows what they're capable of. Looks like the Larsen brothers, their cousin Brandon, and a fourth man she doesn't recognize. The Larsen brothers have a history of violence. Brandon, twice convicted of deer poaching, needed a waiver to join the already-corrupt force. Dirty cops. Men under Rooster's command, taking hush money and bribe money and shoot-first-ask-questions-later money.

"Where's the deputy?" she asks, meaning Pepper.

"Bear trap," says Sid, shaking his head.

Right. Rooster's loaded the woods down with traps. Safer to hunker down in the junkyard and hope against hope some cop Rooster doesn't own comes to their rescue. They hug the fence while the cops shout things like *put your weapon on the ground, raise your hands, and last warning*.

As Eden thumbs the hammer back, Bobby covers his ears and Sid steps away. The pistol feels like it's spring-loaded, jumping back toward her chest as fire spews from the barrel. Again and again she fires at the trio of padlocks, metal fragments exploding, sparks flying, and as the chamber releases an empty click the locks sag and fall.

Sid takes his .45 and chops at the chains, which slink down like serpents. He shoulders the gates open and they run past stacks of cars like small mountains, a few

dozen piles spaced intermittently. Trash litters the ground. A carton's worth of Marlboro Red soft packs, crumpled up, lie in a pile with other tossed-asides. They kick their way through torn envelopes and empty grocery bags and yellowed newspaper sections and continue down a central aisle, ominous shadows cast from the piled-up cars.

“Great,” he says when they reach what feels like the middle. “Now we’re trapped.”

“Look around,” she says. Cars everywhere. Trucks and vans. Couple boats, forklift, even a plane. Something in here has to work.

“Think Rooster would booby trap the cars?”

Eden frowns. She hadn't thought of that.

Glass tinkles nearby, the windshield of a conversion van taking three bullet holes before shattering. They take cover behind a stack of pallets and bald tires. Sid returns fire with the .45, but it's clear he's never spent much time at the gun range. The wooden pallets splinter and the tires sing an echoing, twangy chorus as bullets strike them with alarming frequency.

CHAPTER 56

The process is slow: one arm after another, scooting forward all elbows and knees. Blood slides off his neck and splatters in full moon shapes. Rooster crawls to the front porch and surveys his junkyard. The men have Sid, Eden, and Bobby pinned down. One of the Larsens crouches on the front porch, providing cover fire for his brother, who sneaks along the fence line toward the open gate. Although the pistol is a yardstick from his ear, Rooster only hears muffled sounds. Gunfire is nothing more than a stick pulled free of mud, a thick, wet release.

Brandon and Ira rain down suppressive fire from the back side of the trailer—Rooster can't see them, but he hears the faint pop-pop-pop of a pistol and the muted but distinct bullfrog bellow of a 12 gauge. They have them trapped. Should just be a matter of time. Bobby...his son...a short-lived fatherhood. Probably better this way.

“Kill 'em all!” Rooster tries to say, his words a low growl as he crawls toward Larsen.

A pink mist sprays across Rooster's face. Like he got spritzed with cologne, only it's thicker and warmer. Tastes like an old penny. Larsen, already dead, exit wound like another mouth on the side of his head, a mouth pumping out thick blood, thump-thumps down the front steps. Near the fence line, his brother cries out in pain.

Pepper. He's in the woods, prone position, wasting his fellow deputies with well-aimed shots. Nothing makes sense. Everything is upside down. Rooster crawls back into his trailer and huddles up in his taxidermy room. It'll all be over soon. He'll talk his way out of this. Always does.

Something falls in front of his face. A bloody rag, and even though there are many like it in his trailer, for some reason Rooster recognizes it instantly as the rag he used to wipe Amos's blood off his .357. Still has that Rorschach stain of red. He picks it up and feels the absence of his friend.

Then, through the opening made by the Imperial, she comes for him. Rooster first smells her: wet fur, bloody paws tracking through his trailer. She moves silently, head down, ears pinned back, tail curved into a hook. Light brown fur except for the white around her mouth.

Gunfire erupting all around them and still she pounces, claws retracted, breath sour in Rooster's face. A rotten meat scent. Not until he feels her weight does he believe any of this is real. She's a hundred-and-some-odd pounds, all muscle. Short mandible with huge carnassial teeth that shred flesh faster than you can blink. She's beautiful.

When she licks his face, his blood-spattered face, there is warmth but no love, no guise of affection. Just a taste. A salty appetizer. Her saliva runs down Rooster's cheek and he smiles in spite of everything because he was right all along, he was right, he was right, there *are* mountain lions in Iowa.

CHAPTER 57

“Cover me,” says Sid.

Eden pulls Bobby close with one hand, with the other accepts the .45. “Where are you going?”

“See if I can get to that plane.”

“What for?”

No time to explain. Sid drapes his body low as he runs. Eden offers a couple shots by way of cover fire, but then she’s dry. Waiting for someone’s bullet to bite his back, Sid kicks the chocks free. Orange urethane chocks meant for semi-trucks, not the delicate wheels of a crop duster. Rolly pollies scurry away from the freshly revealed earth. A pistol shot cracks, this time from the woods.

A howl from the guy sneaking along the fence. Another shot from the woods; the howling stops. Pepper? Still alive somehow, pulled out his ankle gun. Gunfire ceases as the other cops try to figure out what’s going on. Eden and Bobby take advantage, scampering toward the plane.

“This is a bad idea,” says Eden, breathing hard, looking up at Sid. Wet strands of hair stick to her forehead, cheeks. Wide, bloodshot eyes.

“I can do this.” Quickly, still anticipating a bullet splintering his spine, Sid hoists himself up through the unlocked window hatch and into the Air Tractor’s pilot seat. No telling when Pepper’s backup will arrive. The other two men sought cover and can sneak around behind Pepper since he’s entirely immobile. Take them a while, but they can.

“You know how to fly this thing?”

“Sure, so long as it works.” The compartment’s a mess: condom wrappers, a dirty sock, some signal flares. Cockpit’s a different kind of cluster: overwhelmed with controls, dials and knobs and meters. It’s a trainer model, dual controls. Clogged more than others, Sid reckons.

Eden pokes her head up above the cockpit. “*Sure?*”

“I want to go,” says Bobby.

“It’s not that hard. Trust me.”

He’ll never get a better chance to shake Pepper and his State buddies. They wanna pin Amos’s death on Sid? Maybe Zeke’s murder too? Nuts to that. He’d rather be a question mark on the police report. Better off in the air. Providing, of course, they can even get in the air.

“You better be right about this,” says Eden, hoisting up Bobby.

As Sid helps the boy into the plane, his mind races, trying to recall secondhand instruction. Mostly he remembers the warnings, the bad things: bank angle deviations, stalling hazards, kamikaze birds, power lines that come out of nowhere. His fingers run across the instrument panel, which confuses Sid because half the meters and toggle switches and buttons have something to do with dusting crops. Pass number? Angle of interception?

Yet it’s less complicated than a fighter. The GPS indicates ground speed, and a tachometer is easy to read. The FUEL QTY needle pokes the forty gallon mark. There is some familiarity, some crossover from his aircraft mechanic days. He’s sweating profusely, a bib of sweat dampening his chest.

Carburetor in cold position. Full forward. Right? The crop duster's engine turns over. Good sign. The triple-bladed propeller starts slowly, but soon fans into one circular blur. Loud as hell. 2,000 RPMs before takeoff. 40 knots. Or was it 50? Or 60? Sid advances the throttle, tachometer needle flicking. The plane lurches slightly. Eden and Bobby are wedged into the copilot's seat, Bobby's feet resting on the brake.

"You gotta move him," he tells Eden.

"What?"

He points to the floorboard. "Brake."

As she complies, the plane eases forward.

"Are we going to fit through the gate?" she asks.

"Barely," says Sid. "Keep off the stick."

Increase back pressure to lift the nose, which should happen at...50 knots. Pretty sure. Easy on the rudder pedals. Flaps up. Did he put the flaps up? If he angles them down a few degrees, can't he get more lift at a lower speed? It's hard to remember the specifics. Outside the gate they have about a hundred feet of clearance before a thick needlegrass field. He's not sure the plane can cut through that and still manage liftoff. Plus, after another couple hundred feet, a line of hackberries and basswoods and junipers form an imposing barrier.

Sid pulls back on the yoke. Sensitive. Good to know. He screws in the throttle until the RPMs surge to 2,000. The plane rumbles forward, lined up perfectly with the front gate.

"Here we go," he says.

Suddenly the plane shifts toward the left wing, where the man in blaze orange has leapt onboard. The Air Tractor teeter-totters off course, headed for a stack of beater cars, smashed metal ready to greet them like a fist. Sid stomps on the rudder pedal, overcorrecting and making the entire plane rock. The man loses balance but manages to hang on, fingers dug into both sides of the wing.

“Get him off there!” yells Sid. He can’t even get out the gate, much less get airborne, with the extra two hundred pounds on the wing.

The man’s hunting cap flies off as Sid repositions the plane toward the gate. They’re picking up speed. With one hand holding him in place, the man wrenches his shotgun, which is strapped around his shoulder, around to face the cockpit. He grins.

“Eden...”

“Got it,” she says, and leans out the open window. She fastballs the .45, hitting the man squarely in the nose. He loses his grip and slides away from them down the length of the wing, cursing and yelling, falling off the edge just as the plane zips through the open gate. Momentum launches him into the fence-top’s razor wire; screams are lost behind them.

The plane shuffles over the bare dirt path, jostling the three occupants. Bobby whimpers as Eden settles back into the cockpit. Before they reach the needlegrass field, Sid feels the nose pull up slowly. Airspeed indicator shows 45 knots and climbing. Sirens wail in the distance. State trooper SUVs string a path down the road, barreling toward the junkyard. Whatever narrative comes out of the mess below will be better heard via the evening news while they are far, far away.

50 knots. 55. The needlegrass scrapes the bottom of the plane. And he feels a familiar sensation, that of uncontrol, only this time he doesn't fight it—he rides it out. Trusting in something just out of reach. There is no safety net. Just a whoosh of excitement, untethered wonder.

Soon they are climbing, a few feet, then a few more, a rush of calm blanketing Sid. They climb until it feels right. He levels off above the trees and telephone wires, where they begin a slow and steady ascent. Then the wind stomps down and the plane's altitude dips. Sid yanks the stick, bringing them back up a little too fast. The Air Tractor shudders as he finds the proper flight level. Small corrections, he tells himself. They straighten out and shoot ahead.

Below them, pinstriped soybean fields. Rows of corn combed neatly into place. A pond or two or three, roads every which way—both gravel and blacktop—and a creek hooking northeast/southwest. Jagged interruption of the Midwestern landscape. The plane is loud and teeth-chattering shaky and yet there is a calmness, a white noise, a *sanctuary* that comes with being so far above everyone else.

When Eden shuffles her feet, Sid notices bloody prints left behind. Her breathing sounds funny. He asks if she's going to be okay.

“Claustrophobic,” she says. “And Rooster took my toes.”

“What?”

“Just the pinkies.”

“Keep your feet elevated,” he says. “Above your heart.”

There isn't much room in the crop duster, but she contorts her body the best she can. Bites her lip, grunts; when she sighs, spit flies forward. Bobby hugs her the whole time. Her feet settle on the dash. She shudders, then glances at Sid.

“Like this?”

Sid says: yes. Looks about right. Above your heart. On the dash, just like all those years ago. Everything the same, everything different. Clouds part and they keep flying, mile after mile, all the way to wherever it is they're going.