

**BLAKE CROUCH** A THRILLER

# RUN



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by  
Blake Crouch

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Confirmation of the murders came by way of two shocking films shot by holidaymakers. The first was initially believed to show a dolphin fishing for salmon - until closer examination revealed a relentless attack on a porpoise. . .The team described the mammals' injuries as "perhaps the worst example of inter-

specific aggression any of us had ever seen. This young female had literally had the life beaten out of her.”

***The Daily Telegraph***  
**January 25, 2008**

The attack was. . .the first recorded instance of lethal raiding among chimpanzees. Until the attack. . .scientists treated the remarkable violence of humanity as something uniquely ours. Scientists thought that only humans deliberately sought out and killed members of their own species.

**Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson**  
***Demonic Males***

\* \* \* \* \*

THE tattered windsock hangs limp against its pole. Weeds erupt through fissures in the ancient pavement of the runway where she stands, and in the distance,

support beams rise from heaps of twisted metal—three hangars, long since toppled upon a half dozen single- and twin-engine airplanes. She watches the Beechcraft that brought her here lift off the ground, props screaming, and climb to clear the pines a quarter mile past the end of the runway. She walks into the field. The midmorning sun blazing down on her bare shoulders. The grass that grazes her sandaled feet still cold with dew. Someone jogs toward her, and beyond them she can see the team already at work, imagines they started the moment the light became worth a damn.

The young man who has come to greet her smiles and tries to take her duffle bag, but she says, “No, I’ve got it, thanks,” and keeps walking, her eyes catching on the colony of white canvas tents standing several football fields away near the northern edge of the forest. Still probably an insufficient distance to avoid the stink when the wind blows out of the south.

“Good flight in?” he asks.

“Little bumpy.”

“It’s so cool to finally meet you. I’ve read all about your work. I’m even using two of your books in my thesis.”

“That’s great. Good luck with it.”

“You know, there’s a few decent bars in town.

Maybe we could get together and talk sometime?"

She lifts the strap of her heavy bag, swings it onto the other shoulder, and ducks under the yellow crime scene tape that circumnavigates the pit.

They arrive at the edge.

The young man says, "I'm doing my thesis on—"

"I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Matt."

"I don't mean to be rude, Matt, but could you give me a minute alone here?"

"Oh, sure. Yeah, of course."

Matt heads off toward the tents, and she lets her bag slide off her shoulder into the grass, estimating the dimensions of the pit at thirty-five meters by twenty meters, and presently attended to by nine people, seemingly oblivious to the flies and the stench, each in their respective worlds, doing what they walk this earth to do. She sits down and watches them work. Nearby, a man with shoulder-length graying hair buries a pickax into a wall of dirt. A young woman—probably another intern—flits from station to station, filling a bucket with backdirt to be added to the mound of gravefill near the southern edge of the pit. Everywhere that human remains have been exposed, red flags stand thrust into the earth. She stops counting them after thirty. The nearest anthropologist

appears on the verge of pedestaling a skeletonized body, down to the detail work now—poking chopsticks between ribs to clear out the dirt. Other skeletons lie partially exposed in the upper layers. The remnants of human beings with whom she will become closely acquainted in the weeks to come. Deeper, the dead are more than likely mummified, possibly even fleshed depending on the water content of the grave. Beside the autopsy tent on the other side, tables have been erected in the grass, and at one of them, a woman she recognizes from a previous UN mission is at work reassembling a small skeleton on a black velvet cloth to be photographed.

She realizes she's crying. Tears are fine, even healthy in this line of work, just never on the clock, never in the grave. If you lose control down there, you might never get it back.

Approaching footsteps snap her out of her reverie. She wipes her face and looks up, sees Sam coming toward her, the bald and scrawny Australian team leader who always wears a tie, especially in the field, his rubber boots swishing through the grass. He plops down beside her, reeking of decomp. Rips off the pair of filthy, elbow-length gloves and tosses them in the grass.

“How many have you taken out so far?” she asks.

“Twenty-nine. Mapping system shows a hundred and fifty, hundred and seventy-five still down in there.”

“What’s the demographic?”

“Men. Women. Children.”

“High-velocity GSWs?”

“Yeah, we’ve collected a ton of .223 Remington casings. But this is another weird one. Same thing we saw in that mass grave in Denver. Maybe you heard about it.”

“I haven’t.”

“Dismemberment.”

“Have you determined what was used?”

“In most instances, it’s not a clean break, like a machete or ax strike. These bones are splintered.”

“A chainsaw would do that.”

“Clever girl.”

“Jesus.”

“So I’m thinking they cut everyone down with AR-15s, and then went through with chainsaws. Making sure no one crawled out.”

The blond hairs on the back of her neck stand erect, a rod of ice descending her spine. The sun burns down out of the bright June sky, more intense for the elevation. Brushstrokes of snow linger above timberline on the distant peaks.

“You okay?” Sam asks.



“Yeah. Just that this is my first mission out west. I’d been working New York City up until now.”

“Look, take the day if you want. Get yourself acclimated. You’ll need your head right for this one.”

“No.” She stands, hoisting the duffle bag out of the grass and engaging that compartment in her brain that functions solely as a cold, indifferent scientist. “Let’s go to work.”

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There is no decent place to stand in a massacre.  
**Leonard Cohen**

\* \* \* \* \*

THE president had just finished addressing the nation, and the anchors and pundits were back on the

airwaves, scrambling, as they had been for the last three days, to sort out the chaos.

Dee Colclough lay watching it all on a flatscreen from a ninth-floor hotel room ten minutes from home, a sheet twisted between her legs, the air-conditioning cool against the film of sweat on her skin.

She looked over at Kiernan, said, “Even the anchors look scared.”

Kiernan stubbed out his cigarette and blew a river of smoke at the television.

“I got called up,” he said.

“Your Guard unit?”

“I have to report tomorrow morning.” He lit another one. “What I hear, we’ll just be patrolling neighborhoods.”

“Keeping the peace until it all blows over?”

He glanced at her, head cocked with that boyish smirk she’d fallen for six months ago when he’d deposed her as an adverse expert witness in a medical malpractice case. “Does anything about this make you feel like it’s going to blow over?”

A new banner scrolled across the bottom of the screen—45 dead in a mass shooting at a Southern Baptist church in Columbia, South Carolina.

“Jesus Christ,” Dee said.

Kiernan dragged heavily on his cigarette.

“Something’s happening,” he said.

“Obviously. The whole country—”

“That’s not what I mean, love.”

“What are you talking about?”

He didn’t answer right away, just sat there for a while, smoking.

“It’s been coming on now, little by little, for days,” he said finally.

“I don’t understand.”

“I barely do myself.”

Through the cracked window of their hotel room—distant gunshots and sirens.

“This was supposed to be our week,” she said.

“You were going to tell Myra. I was—”

“You should go home, be with your family.”

“You’re my family.”

“Your kids at least.”

“What is this, Kiernan?” She could feel an angry knot bulging in her throat. “Are we not in this together? Are you having second thoughts about everything or what?”

“It’s not that.”

“Do you have any concept of what I’ve already sacrificed for you?”

She couldn’t see all of his face in the mirror on the opposite wall, but she could see his eyes. Gaping into

nothing. A thousand-yard stare. Somewhere other than this room. He'd gone deep, and she'd sensed it even before this moment, in the way he'd made love to her. Something held back. Something missing.

She climbed out of bed and walked over to her dress where she'd thrown it against the wall two hours ago.

"You don't feel it?" he asked. "Not at all?"

"I don't understand what—"

"Forget it."

"Kiernan—"

"Fucking forget it."

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

Dee pulled the straps over her shoulders as Kiernan glared at her through the cloud of smoke around his head. He was forty-one years old, with short black hair, and a two-day shadow that reminded her so much of her father.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"You and I are not the same anymore, Dee."

"Did I do something or—"

"I'm not talking about our relationship. It's deeper. It's. . .so much more profound than that."

“You’re not making sense.”

She was standing by the window. The air coming in was cool and it smelled of the city and the desert that surrounded it. A pair of gunshots drew her attention, and when she looked through the glass she saw grids of darkness overspreading the city.

Dee glanced back at Kiernan, and she’d just opened her mouth to say something, when the lights and the television in their room cut out.

She froze.

Her heart accelerating.

Couldn’t see anything but the flare and fade of Kiernan’s tobacco ember.

Heard him exhale in the dark, and then his voice, all the more terrifying for its evenness.

“You need to get away from me right now,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s this part of me, Dee, getting stronger every time I breathe in, that wants to hurt you.”

“Why?”

She heard the covers rip back. The sound of Kiernan rushing across the carpet.

He stopped inches from her.

She smelled the tobacco on his breath, and when she palmed his chest, felt his body shaking.

“What’s happening to you?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t stop it, Dee. Please remember that I love you.”

He put his hands on her bare shoulders, and she thought he was going to kiss her, but then she was flying through darkness across the room.

She crashed into the entertainment center, stunned, her shoulder throbbing from the impact.

Kiernan shouted, “Now get the fuck out while you still can.”

\* \* \* \* \*

JACK Colclough moved down the hallway, past the kids’ bedrooms, and into the kitchen, where four candles on the granite countertop and two more on the breakfast table made this the brightest room in the house. Dee stood in shadow at the sink, filling another milk jug with water from the tap. The cabinets surrounding her thrown open and vacated, the stovetop cluttered with cans of food that hadn’t seen the light of day in years.

“I can’t find the roadmap,” Jack said.

“You looked under the bed?”

“Yes.”

“Last place I saw it.”

Jack set the flashlight on the counter and stared at his fourteen-year-old daughter, pouting at the breakfast table, her purple-streaked blond hair twirled around her finger.

“Got your clothes together yet?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Go, Naomi, right now, and help Cole pack, too. I think your brother got distracted.”

“We aren’t really leaving, are we?”

“Get going.”

Naomi pushed back from the table, her chair shrieking against the hardwood floor, and stormed out of the kitchen down the hallway.

“Hey,” he shouted after her.

“Cut her a break,” Dee said. “She’s terrified.”

Jack stood beside his wife.

The night beyond the windowglass was moonless and unmarred by even the faintest pinpricks of light. The city’s second night without power.

“This is the last jug,” Dee said. “Makes eight gallons.”

“That isn’t going to last us very long.”

From the battery-powered radio on the windowsill

above the sink, an old woman's voice replaced the static that had dominated the airwaves for the last six hours. Jack reached over, turned up the volume.

They listened as she read another name, another address over the radio.

Jack said, "They've lost their fucking minds."

Dee turned off the tap, screwed a cap onto the final jug. "You think anyone's actually acting on that?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want to leave."

"I'll take these jugs out to the car. Go make sure the kids are getting packed."

Jack hit the light switch out of habit, but when he opened the door, the garage remained dark. He shined the flashlight on the four steps that dropped out of the utility room. The smooth concrete was cold through his socks. He popped the hatch to the cargo area, illumination flooding out of the overhead dome lights into the two-car garage. He set the first jug of water in the back of the Land Rover Discovery. Their backpacks and camping equipment hung from hooks over the chest freezer, and he lifted them down off the wall. Pristine, unblemished by even a speck of trail dust. Four never-slept-in sleeping bags dangled from the ceiling in mesh sacks. He dragged a workbench



over from the red Craftsman tool drawer and climbed up to take them down. Dee had been begging for a family camping trip ever since he'd purchased three thousand dollars' worth of backpacking gear, and he'd fully intended for their family to spend every other weekend in the mountains or the desert. But two years had passed, and life had happened, priorities changed. The gas stove and water filter hadn't even been liberated from their packaging, which still bore price tags.

Inside the house, Dee released a loud gasp. He grabbed the flashlight, negotiated the sprawl of backpacks and sleeping bags, and bolted up the steps and through the door into the utility room. Past the washer and dryer, back into the kitchen. Naomi and his seven-year-old son, Cole, stood at the opening to the hallway, their faces all warmth and shadow in the candlelight, watching their mother at the sink.

Jack shined the light on Dee—her face streaked with tears, body visibly shaking.

She pointed at the radio.

"They just read off Marty Anderson's name. They're going through the humanities department, Jack."

"Turn it up."

"Jim Barbour is a professor of religious studies at

the University of New Mexico.” The old woman on the radio spoke slowly and with precision. “His address is Two Carpenter Court. Those of you near campus, go now, and while you’re in the neighborhood, stop by the home of Jack Colclough.”

“Dad—”

“Shhh.”

“—a professor of philosophy at UNM.”

“Oh my God.”

“Shhh.”

“—lives at Fourteen, fourteen Arroyo Way. Repeat. Fourteen, fourteen Arroyo Way. Go now.”

“Oh my God, Jack. Oh my God.”

“Get the food in the back of the car.”

“This is not—”

“Listen to me. Get the food in the back of the car. Naomi, bring yours and Cole’s clothes out to the garage. I’ll meet you all there in one minute.”

He ran down the hall, his sockfeet skidding across the dusty hardwood floor as he rounded the turn into the master bedroom. Clothes everywhere. Drawers evacuated from a pair of dressers. Sweaters spilling out of the oak chest at the foot of the bed. Into the walk-in closet, stepping on shoes and winter coats and handbags long gone out of vogue. He reached for the highest shelf on the back wall, fingers touching the

hard plastic case and two small boxes, which he crammed into the pockets of his khaki slacks.

He returned to the bedroom, dropped to his knees, his stomach, crawling under the bed frame until he grasped the steel barrel of the Mossberg, loaded and trigger-locked.

Then back on his feet, down the hall, through the kitchen, the living room, foyer, right up to the front door, the lightbeam crossing adobe walls covered in photographs of his smiling family—vacations and holidays from another lifetime. Beside the door, on a table of wrought iron and glass, he grabbed his keys, his wallet, even his phone though there'd been no signal in two days. Jammed his feet into a pair of trail shoes still caked with mud from his last run in the Bosque, not even a week ago. He didn't realize how badly his hands were shaking until he failed on the first two attempts to tie his shoelaces.

Dee was struggling to fit a sleeping bag into a compression sack as he came down the steps into the garage.

"We don't have time for that," he said. "Just cram it in."

"We're running out of space."

He grabbed the sleeping bag from her and shoved it into the back of the Land Rover on top of the small

cardboard box filled with canned food.

“Throw the packs in,” he said as he lay the shotgun on the floor against the backseat.

“You find the map?” Dee asked.

“No. Just leave the rest of this shit. Here.” He handed her the plastic gun case and a box of 185 grain semijacketed hollowpoints. “See if you can load the Forty-five.”

“I’ve never even shot this gun, Jack.”

“Makes two of us.”

Dee went around to the front passenger door and climbed in while Jack forced the cargo hatch to close. He reached up to the garage door opener, pulled a chain that disengaged the motor. The door lifted easily, cool desert air filling the garage. The spice of wet sage in the breeze reminded him of cheap aftershave—his father. A lone cricket chirped in the yard across the street. No houselights or streetlamps or sprinklers. The surrounding homes almost invisible but for the gentlest starlight.

He caught the scent of cigarette smoke the same instant he heard the sound of footsteps in the grass.

A shadow was moving across his lawn—a darker patch of black coming toward him, and something the shadow carried reflected the interior lights of the Land Rover as a fleeting glimmer of silver.

“Who’s there?” Jack said.

No response.

A cigarette hit the ground, sparks scattering in the grass.

Jack was taking his first step back into the garage toward the open driver side door, realizing everything was happening too fast. He wasn’t going to react in time to stop what was about to—

“Don’t come any closer.” His wife’s voice. He looked over, saw Dee standing at the back of the SUV, pointing the .45 at the man who had stopped six feet away. He wore khaki canvas shorts, thong sandals, and a cream-colored oxford pollocked with bloodspatter. The glimmer was the blade of a butcher knife, and the hands that held it were dark with drying blood.

Dee said, “Kiernan? What are you doing here?”

He smiled. “I was just in the neighborhood. Been driving around, making some stops. I didn’t know you owned a gun. I’ve been looking for one myself.” Kiernan looked at Jack. “You must be Jack. We haven’t met, but I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m the guy who’s been fucking your wife.”

“Listen to me, Kiernan,” Dee said. “You’re sick. You need—”

“No, I’m actually better than I’ve ever been.” He

pointed the tip of the butcher knife at the Land Rover.  
“Where you going?”

Tires screeched, an engine revved, and a few blocks away, headlights passed behind a hedge, light flickering through the crape myrtles like a strobe. A succession of distant pops erupted in the night.

Jack said, “Dee we need to leave right now.”

“Go back to your car, Kiernan.”

The man didn't move.

Jack took a step back and eased himself into the driver seat.

“Who is it out there, Daddy?” Cole asked.

Jack fished the keys out of his pocket. Craned his neck, peering into the backseat at his tense children.

“Naomi, Cole, I want you both to lay down in the backseat.”

“Why?”

“Just do what I tell you, Na.”

“Dad, I'm scared.”

“Hold your brother's hand. You all right, Cole?”

“Yes.”

“Good man.”

He started the engine as Kiernan receded into the darkness of the front yard.

Dee jumped in beside him, slammed her door and locked it.

“You know how to pick ’em, Dee.”

“Do we have everything we need?”

“We have what we have, and now it’s time to leave.

Stay down, kids.”

“Where are we going?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know, buddy. No talking, all right? Daddy needs to think.”

The dashboard clock read 9:31 p.m. as Jack shifted into reverse and backed out of the garage and down the driveway, nothing but the reddish glow of taillights to guide him. He turned into the street, put the car in drive. Hesitated, fingers searching for the automatic window control. The glass beside his head hummed down into the door. Over the idling of the Discovery’s engine, he heard another car approaching at high speed, headlights just becoming visible in the rearview mirror.

He stomped the gas, the Discovery accelerating through pure darkness.

“Jack, how can you see?”

“I can’t.”

He made a blind turn onto the next street, drove for several blocks in the dark.

Dee said, “Look.”

A house burned on the corner up ahead, flames shooting out of the dormers, the branches of an

overhanging cottonwood fringed with embers while molten leaves rained down into the lawn.

“What is it?” Naomi asked.

“A house on fire.”

“Whose?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want to see.”

“No, Cole. Stay down with your sister.”

They sped up the street.

“I’m going to run us into something.” Jack flipped on the headlights. The console lit up. “You’re kidding me,” he said.

“What?”

“Way under a quarter of a tank.”

“I told you it was getting low last week.”

“You aren’t capable of pumping gas into a car?”

Three houses down, the headlights swept over two trucks that had pulled onto the lawn of an expansive adobe house.

Jack slowed.

“That’s the Rosenthals’ place.”

Through the drawn shades of the living room windows: four loud, bright flashes.

“What was that, Dad?”

“Nothing, Na.”

He gunned the engine and glanced over at Dee, a



deathgrip on the steering wheel to keep his hands steady. Nodded at the gun in his wife's lap.

"Wasn't even loaded, was it?"

"I don't know how."

The university campus loomed empty and dark as Dee ripped open a box of ammunition. They passed a row of dorms. The quad. The student union. A squat brick building whose third floor housed Jack's office. It occurred to him that today would have been the deadline for his bioethics class to hand in their papers on euthanasia.

"There's a button on the left side behind the trigger," he said. "I think it releases the magazine."

"Are you talking about a gun?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"Are you going to shoot somebody?"

"It's only to protect us, buddy."

"But you might have to kill someone?"

"Hopefully not." Jack watched Dee thumb another semijacketed round into the magazine.

"How many will it hold?" she asked.

"Nine, I think."

"Where are we going, Jack?"

"Lomas Boulevard, then the interstate."

"And then?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to work that—" Two sets of

headlights appeared a hundred yards ahead. "Jesus Christ."

"You see them, Jack?"

"Of course I see them."

"What's happening, Dad?"

In the rearview mirror, a third set of headlights rushed toward them.

"Jack, do something."

His foot depressed the brake pedal into the floorboard.

"Jack."

"Sit up kids."

"What are you doing?"

"Naomi, Cole, sit up. Give me the gun."

Dee handed over the .45, which he stowed under his seat.

"What are you doing, Jack?"

He took his foot off the brake, the Discovery nearing the roadblock.

"Jack, tell me what you're—"

"Shut up. Everybody shut up."

A large oak had been felled across the road, the middle section excised and two pickup trucks parked in front, blocking passage, their highbeams glaring into the night.

Dee said, "Oh, God, they're armed."

Jack counted four people standing in front of the vehicles, silhouetted by the headlights. One of them came forward as the Discovery closed within ten yards—a man wearing an Isotopes baseball cap and a red windbreaker. He trained a shotgun on the Discovery's windshield and extended his right hand for Jack to stop.

Jack shifted into park, locked the doors.

"I'll do the talking. Nobody say a word."

The third truck pulled within several feet of the Discovery's back bumper, its headlights halfway up the glass of the back hatch, so they shone directly into the rearview mirror. The man with the shotgun produced a flashlight and circled the Land Rover, shining the beam through every window before arriving back at Jack's door, where he tapped the glass and made circles in the air with his right pointer finger. Jack noted a cold trickle of sweat gliding over the contours of his ribs. He found the switch, lowered the window eight inches.

"What's going on?" he said, and it came out naturally enough, like he'd been pulled over for a blown taillight, just some annoying traffic stop in the flow of an otherwise normal day.

The man said, "Turn the interior lights on."

"Why?"

“Right now.”

Jack hit the lights.

The man leaned forward, the sharp tang of rusted metal wafting into the car, Jack watching the eyes behind the square, silver frames, the glasses of an engineer, he thought—large, utilitarian. Those eyes took in his wife, his children, before settling back on Jack with a level of indifference, verging on disgust, that prior to this moment was completely alien to his experience.

The man said, “Where you off to so late?”

“What business is that of yours?”

When the man just stared and made no response, Jack said, “I don’t know what this is all about, but we’re going to move on here.”

“I asked you where you’re going.”

Jack tried to wet the roof of his mouth with his tongue, but it had gone dry as sandpaper.

“Just up to Santa Fe to see some friends.”

The driver’s door of the truck behind them opened. Someone stepped down onto the pavement and walked over to join the others at the roadblock.

“Why do you have packs and jugs of water in the back of your car?”

“We’re going camping. There’s mountains up that way if you hadn’t heard.”

“I don’t think you’re going to Santa Fe.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think.”

“Give me your driver’s license.”

“I don’t think so.”

The man racked a fresh shell into the chamber, and the awful noise of the pump action set Jack’s heart racing.

“All right,” he said. He opened the center console, took out his wallet, spent ten seconds trying to slide his license out of the clear plastic sleeve. He handed it through the window, and the man took it and walked over to the trucks and the other men.

Dee whispered through tears, “Jack, look out your window at the other side of the road.”

Where the light from the trucks diffused into the barest strands of illumination, Jack saw a minivan parked in a vacant lot, and just a few feet from it, four pairs of shoes poking up through the tall, bending grass, the feet motionless and spread at forty-five degree angles, toes pointing toward the sky.

“They’re going to kill us, Jack.”

He reached under his seat, lifted the .45 into his lap.

The man coming back toward the Discovery now.

“Dee, kids,” Jack said as he shifted into reverse, “unbuckle your seatbelts right now and when I clear

my throat, get down as low as you can into the floorboards and cover your heads.”

The man reached his window.

“Get out of the car. All of you except the boy.”

“Why?”

The shotgun barrel passed over the lip of the windowglass, stopping six inches from Jack’s left ear. So close he could feel the heat from recent use radiating off the steel.

“This is not the way you want to handle this, Mr. Colclough. Turn off the engine.”

The other men walked over.

Jack cleared his throat and jammed his foot into the gas pedal, the Land Rover lurching back, a winch punching through the rear window, glass spraying everywhere. He grabbed the smoldering barrel with one hand and shifted into drive with the other. The shotgun blast ruptured his eardrum and blew the glass out of a window, the recoil ripping the barrel out of his hand along with several layers of cauterized skin. He could hear only a distant ringing, like a symphony of old telephones buried deep underground. Muzzleflashes and the front passenger window exploded, shards of glass embedding themselves in the right side of his face as he pushed the gas pedal into the floor again and cranked the steering wheel to

miss the branches of the downed oak tree.

The Discovery tore through the grass and weeds of the vacant lot, the jarring so violent at this speed, Jack could barely keep his grip on the steering wheel. He turned up a grassy slope and took the Land Rover through a six-foot fence at thirty miles per hour into the backyard of a brick ranch. Plowed over a rose garden and a birdbath, then broke through the fence again near the house and raced down the empty driveway and onto a quiet street.

He hit seventy-five within four blocks, blowing through two-way stops, four-way stops, and one dark traffic signal until he saw lights in the distance—the fast-approaching intersection with Lomas Boulevard.

He let the Discovery begin to slow, finally brought it to a full stop on the curb, and shifted into park. Darkness in the rearview mirror, no incoming headlights. He tried to listen for the sound of tailing cars, but he heard only those muffled telephones and the painful bass throbbing of his left eardrum. He was shaking all over.

He said, “Is anybody hurt?”

Dee climbed out of the floorboard and said something.

“I can’t hear you,” he said. In the backseat, he saw Naomi sitting up. “Where’s Cole?” Dee squirmed

around and leaned into the backseat, reaching down into the floorboard where Cole had taken cover. "Is Cole okay?" The murmur of voices grew louder. "Would someone please tell me if my son is okay?"

Dee leaned back into the front seat, put her hands on her husband's face, and pulled his right ear to her lips.

"Stop shouting. Cole's fine, Jack. He's just scared and balled up on the floor."

He drove six blocks to Lomas Boulevard. This part of the city still had power. The road luminous with streetlights, traffic lights, the glow of fast-food restaurant signs that stretched for a quarter mile in either direction like a glowing mirage of civilization. Jack pulled through a red light and into the empty westbound lanes. The orange reserve tank light clicked on.

As they passed through the university's medical campus, someone stepped out into the road, and Jack had to swerve to miss them.

Dee said something.

"What?"

"Go back," she shouted.

"Are you crazy?"



“That was a patient.”

He turned around in the empty boulevard and drove back toward the hospital and pulled over to the curb. The patient already halfway across the road and staggering barefoot like he might topple—tall and gaunt, his head shaved, a scythe-shaped scar curving from just above his left ear across the top of his scalp, the kind of damage it would have taken a couple hundred stitches to close. The wind rode the gown up his toothpick legs.

Jack lowered his window as the man collided breathlessly into his door. He tried to speak but he was gulping down breaths of air and emanating the hospital stench of sanitized death.

At last the man raised his head off his forearms and said in a voice gone soft and raspy from disuse, “What’s happening? I woke up several hours ago. The doctors and nurses are gone.”

Jack said, “How long have you been in the hospital?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know how you got there?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re in Albuquerque.”

“I know that. I live here.”

Jack shifted into park, eyeing the rearview mirror.

“It’s October fifth—”

“October?”

“Things started about a week ago.”

“What things?”

“At first, it was just bits on the news that would catch your attention. A murder in a good neighborhood. A hit-and-run. But the reports kept coming and there were more everyday and they got more violent and unbelievable. It wasn’t just happening here. It was all over the country. A police officer in Phoenix went on a shooting rampage in an elementary school and then a nursing home. There were fifty home invasions in one night in Salt Lake. Homes were being burned. Just horrific acts of violence.”

“Jesus.”

“The president made a televised speech last night, and right after, the power went out. Cell phone coverage became intermittent. The internet too jammed up to use. By this afternoon, there were really no functioning lines of communication, not even satellite radio, and the violence was pandemic.”

The man looked away from Jack as gunshots rang out in a neighborhood across the street.

“Why is it happening?” he asked.

“I don’t know. The power went out before any consensus was reached. They think it’s some virus,

but beyond that. . .”

Dee said, “Do you know how you were injured?”

“What?”

“I’m a doctor. Maybe I can help—”

“I need to find my family.”

Jack saw the man look into their car, and he thought he was going to ask for a ride, wondering how he would tell him no, but then the man turned suddenly and limped off down the road.

There were lights on inside, but no customers, no cashier. He swiped his credit card through the scanner, waiting for authorization as he studied the ghost town and listened over the dwindling telephones in his head for the threat of approaching cars.

All but super premium had run dry. He stood in the cold pumping twenty-three and a half gallons into the Discovery’s tank and thinking how he’d meant to bring the red plastic container that held the lawnmower gas.

As he screwed the gas cap on, three pickup trucks roared by, pushing ninety down Lomas. Jack didn’t wait for a receipt.

Another mile and I-25 materialized beyond some dealerships, cars backed up from the onramps on either side of the overpass. Streams of red light

winding north through the city, streams of white light crawling south.

Jack said, "Doesn't look like they're getting anywhere, does it?"

He veered into the left lane and streaked under the overpass at sixty miles per hour, his right ear improving, beginning to pick up the guttural sounds of the straining engine and the whimperings of Cole.

A blur of citylight, the Wells Fargo building glowing green in the distance. They shot three miles through downtown and Old Town, past Tingley Park, and then across the Rio Grande into darkness again, the western edge of the city without power.

"You have blood coming out of your ear, Jack."

He wiped the side of his face.

Naomi said, "Are you hurt, Dad?"

"I'm fine, sweetie. Comfort your brother."

They drove north along the river. Across the water, a great fire was consuming a neighborhood of affluent homes, their immense frames visible amid the flames. Jack said under his breath, "Where the fuck is the military?"

Dee saw the lights first—a cluster of them a couple

miles up the road.

“Jack.”

“I see them.”

He killed the headlights and braked, crossed the yellow line into the other lane, then dropped down off the shoulder onto the desert. The Discovery's cornerlamps barely lit the way, showing only ten feet of the desert floor as Jack negotiated between shrubs and sagebrush and skirted the edge of a serpentine arroyo.

The hardpan reached the broken pavement. Jack pulled back onto the highway and turned out the cornerlamps. Some distance to the south, the roadblock they'd detoured at the intersection of 48 and 550 stood out in the dark—cones of light blazing into the night.

They rode north without headlights, cold desert air streaming in through the jagged windowglass. Jack's eyes were adjusting to the starlight, so that he could just discern the white wisps of reflective paint that framed the highway. Their city fell away behind them, a mosaic of darkness and light and four distinct fires that burned visibly from a distance of twenty miles.

An hour north, on the Zia Reservation, they met with

a car heading south, its taillights instantly firing, Jack watching in the rearview mirror as it spun around in the highway and started after them. He accelerated, but the car quickly closed on their bumper. Its lightbar throwing shivers of blue and red through the fractured glass of the Discovery's windows.

The officer's boots scraped the pavement as he approached the Land Rover, his sidearm drawn and paired with a Mag-Lite. He sidled up to Jack's lowered window and pointed a revolver at his head.

"You armed, sir?"

Jack had to turn his right ear to the man so he could hear, blinking against the sharp light. "I have a Forty-five in my lap."

"Loaded?"

"Yes sir."

"Just keep your hands on the steering wheel." The state police officer shined his light into the backseat, said, "Jesus." He holstered his gun. "You folks all right?"

"Not especially," Jack said.

"Somebody shot your car up pretty good."

"Yes sir."

"You coming from Albuquerque?"

"We are."

“How are things there?”

“Terrible. What do you hear? We’ve been checking our car radio, but it’s all static.”

“I hear I’ve lost officers up on the northwest plateau, but I don’t know that for certain. I been told of roadblocks, widespread home invasions. A National Guard unit getting slaughtered, but it’s all rumors. Things came apart so fast, you know?” The officer pulled off his wool hat. He scratched his bald dome, tugged at the tufts of gray that flared out above his ears and ringed his skull. “Where you headed?”

“We don’t know yet,” Jack said.

“Well, I’d get off the highway. Least for the night. I been chased and shot at by several vehicles. They couldn’t catch my Crown Vic, but they’d probably run you down no problem.”

“We’ll do that.”

“You say you have a Forty-five?”

“Yes sir.”

“Comfortable with it?”

“I used to deer hunt with my father, but it’s been years since I’ve even shot a gun.”

The officer’s eyes cut to the backseat, his face brightening. He waved and Jack glanced back, saw Cole sit up and look through the glass. He lowered Cole’s window.

“How you doing there, buddy? You look like a real brave boy to me. Is that right?”

Cole just stared.

“What’s your name?”

Jack couldn’t hear his son answer, but the officer reached his gloved hand through the window.

“Good to meet you, Cole.” He turned back to Jack. “Hunker down someplace safe for the night. You ain’t a pretty sight.”

“My wife’s a doctor. She’ll patch me up.”

The officer lingered at his window, staring off into the emptiness all around them—starlit desert and the scabrous profile of a distant mountain range, pitch black against the navy sky. “What do you make of it?” he said.

“Of what?”

“Whatever this is that’s happening. What we’re doing to ourselves.”

“I don’t know.”

“You think this is the end?”

“Sort of feels that way tonight, doesn’t it?”

The officer rapped his knuckles on the Discovery’s roof. “Stay safe, folks.”

Ten miles on, Jack left the highway. He crossed a cattle guard, and drove 2.8 miles over a



washboarded, runoff-rutted wreck of a road until the outcropping of house-size rocks loomed straight ahead in the windshield. He pulled behind a boulder, so that even with the lights on, their Land Rover would be completely hidden from the highway. Shifted into park. Killed the engine. Dead quiet in this high desert. He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned around in his seat so he could see his children.

“You know what we’re going to do?” he said. “When this is all over?”

“What?” Cole asked.

“I’m taking you kids back to Los Barriles.”

“Where?”

“You remember, buddy. That little town on the Sea of Cortez, where we stayed over Christmas a couple years ago? Well, when this is over, we’re going back for a month. Maybe two.”

He looked at Dee, at Naomi and Cole.

Exhaustion. Fear.

The overhead dome light cut out. Jack could feel the car listing in the wind, bits of dust and dirt and sand slamming into the metal like microscopic ball bearings.

Cole said, “Remember that sandcastle we built?”

Jack smiled in the darkness. They’d opened presents and gone out to the white-sand beach and

spent all day, the four of them, building a castle with three-foot walls and a deep moat, wet sand dribbled over the towers and spires to resemble rotten and eroded stone.

“That sucked,” Naomi said. “Remember what happened?”

A storm had blown in that afternoon over Baja as the tide was coming in. When a rod of lightning touched the sea a quarter mile out, the Colcloughs had screamed and raced back to their bungalow as the rain poured down and the black clouds detonated. Jack had glanced back as they scrambled over the dunes, glimpsed their sandcastle rebuffing its first decent wave, the moat filling with saltwater.

“Do you think the waves knocked it down?” Cole said.

“No, it’s still standing.”

“Don’t speak to your brother that way. No, Cole, it wouldn’t have lasted the night.”

“But it was a big castle.”

“I know, but the tide’s a powerful force.”

“We walked out there the next morning, Cole,” Dee said. “Remember what we saw?”

“Smooth sand.”

“Like we hadn’t even been there,” Naomi said.

“We were there,” Jack said, and he pulled the key

out of the ignition. "That was a great day."

"That was a stupid day," Naomi said. "What's the point of building a sandcastle if you can't watch it get destroyed?"

Jack could hear in her voice that she didn't mean it. Just trying to push whatever button she thought he'd left unguarded. Under different circumstances, it would've pissed him off, but not tonight.

He said, "Well, it wasn't stupid to me, Na. That was one of my favorite days. One of the best of my life."

Jack unlocked the shotgun. He found a good-size rock and smashed out the tail- and brake- and reverse lights. Unloaded everything from the cargo area and picked the glass slivers out of the carpet and knocked the remaining glass out of the back window, the rear right panel, the front passenger window. The army-green paint of the front passenger door and the back hatch bore several bulletholes. A round had even punctured the leather of Jack's headrest, a white puff of stuffing mushroomed out of the exit hole.

Jack had folded the backseat down. Naomi and Cole slept in their down bags in the car. It was after 1:00 a.m., and he sat against a boulder. Dee's

headlamp was shining in his eyes as she wiped the right side of his face with an iodine prep pad. She used plastic tweezers from the first aid kit to dig the glass shrapnel out of his face.

“Here comes a big one,” she said.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

The shard clinked into the small aluminum tray, and when she'd removed all the glass she could see, she dabbed away the blood with a fresh iodine pad.

“Does this need stitches?” he asked.

“No. How's the left ear?”

“What?”

“How's the left ear?”

“What?”

“How's the—”

He smiled.

“Fuck you. Let's dress that hand.”

They inflated the Therm-a-Rests and crawled into their sleeping bags and lay on the desert floor under the stars.

Jack heard Dee crying.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“No, what?”

“You don’t want to hear it.”

“Kiernan.” Jack had known about Dee’s lover almost from the inception of their affair—she’d been honest with him from the beginning, and on some level he respected her for that—but this was the first time he’d spoken the man’s name.

“That wasn’t him,” she said. “He’s a decent man.”

“You loved him.”

She nodded, a sob slipping out.

“I’m sorry, Dee.”

The wind kicked up. They faced each other to escape the clouds of dust.

“I’m scared, Jack.”

“We’ll keep heading north. Maybe it’s better in Colorado.”

In the intermittent moments of stillness when the wind died away, Jack stared up into the sky and watched the stars fall and the imperceptible migration of the Milky Way. He kept thinking how strange it felt to be lying beside his wife again. He’d been sleeping in the guestroom the last two months. They’d lied to the kids, told them it was because of his snoring, having promised each other they’d handle the dissolution of their family with grace and discretion.

Dee finally slept. He tried to close his eyes but his mind wouldn’t stop. His ear throbbed and the

scorched nerve endings flared under the barrel-shaped blister across the fingers of his left hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

COYOTES woke him, a pack trotting across the desert half a mile away. Dee's head rested in the crook of his arm, and he managed to extricate himself without rousing her. He sat up. His sleeping bag was glazed with dew. The desert the color of blued steel in the predawn. He wondered how long he'd slept—an hour? Three? His hand no longer burned but he still couldn't hear a thing out of his left ear except a lonely, hollow sound like wind blowing across an open bottle top. He unzipped his bag and got up. He slipped his socked feet into unlaced trail shoes and walked over to the Land Rover. Stood at the glassless back hatch watching his children sleep as the light strengthened all around him.

They were packed and on the road before the sun came up, pressing north, the morning air whipping through the broken windows. For breakfast, they passed around a bag of stale tortilla chips and a jug of water that had chilled almost to freezing in the night. Eighty miles through Indian country—sagebrush and

pinion and long vistas and deserted trading posts and buttes that flushed when first struck by sunlight and a ridiculous casino at seven thousand feet in the middle of nothing on the Apache res. The two towns they blazed through on the northwest plateau stood perhaps too quiet for eight-thirty on a Friday morning, like Christmas and everyone indoors, but nothing else seemed wrong.

Jack said, "Give me your BlackBerry, Na."

"Why? There's no signal."

"I want it fully charged in case we get one."

She handed it up between the seats.

"I'm really worried about you, Na," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"You haven't been able to send a text in two days. I can't imagine the withdrawal you're going through."

Jack saw Dee smile.

"You're such a retard, Dad."

They climbed through high desert as the road followed the course of a river. Dee turned on the radio, let it seek the AM dial—nothing but static—and FM landed just one station, an NPR affiliate out of southwest Colorado that had diverged markedly from its standard programming. A young man read names

and addresses over the airwaves.

Jack slammed the palm of his hand into the radio.

The volume spiked, the station changed, the car filled with blaring static.

Twenty miles ahead, out of a valley tucked into the juniper-covered foothills, reams of smoke lifted into the blue October sky.

When the kids were younger, they had vacationed in this tourist town—ski trips after Christmas, autumn driving tours to see the aspen leaves, the long holiday weekends that framed their summers.

“Let’s not go through there,” Dee said.

A few miles ahead, everything appeared to be burning.

“I think we should try to get through,” he said. “This is a good route. Not too many people live in these mountains.”

Powerlines had been cut down to block the business route, forcing Jack to detour up Main Avenue, and when they turned into the historic district, Dee said, “Jesus.” Everything smoking, getting ready to burn or burning or burned already. Broken glass on the street. Fire hydrants launching arcs of white spray. Tendrils of black smoke seething through the door-



and window-frames of the hotel where they used to stay—a redbrick relic from the mining era. Two blocks down the smoke thickened enough to blot out the sky. Orange fire raged through the exploded third-floor windows of an apartment building, and the canopies of the red oaks that lined the sidewalks flamed like torches.

“Unbelievable,” Dee said.

The kids stared out their windows, speechless.

Jack’s eyes burned.

He said, “We’re getting a lot of smoke in here.”

The windows blew out of a luxury Hummer on the next block. Flames engulfed it.

“Go faster, Jack.”

Cole started coughing.

Dee looked back between the front seats. “Pull your shirt over your mouth and breathe through it. Both of you.”

“Are you doing it too, Mama?”

“Yes.”

“What about Daddy?”

“He will if he can. He needs his hands to drive right now.”

They passed through a wall of smoke, the world outside the windows grayish white, all things obscured. They rolled through an intersection under

dark traffic signals.

“Look out, Jack.”

“I see it.”

He steered around a FedEx truck that had been abandoned in the middle of the street, its left turn signal still blinking, though at half-speed, like a heart with barely any beat left in it. Cole coughed again.

They emerged from the smoke.

Jack slowed the car, said, “Close your eyes, kids.”

Cole through his shirt: “Why?”

“Because I told you to.”

“What is it?”

Jack brought the Land Rover to a full stop. An ember blew in through Dee’s window and alighted upon the dash. Smoldering into the plastic. Ash fell on the windshield like charcoal snow. He looked back at his children.

“I don’t want you to see what’s up ahead.”

“Is it something bad?” Cole said.

“Yes, it’s something very bad.”

“But you’re going to see it.”

“I have to see it because I’m driving. If I shut my eyes, we’ll wreck. But I don’t want to see it. Mama’s going to close her eyes, too.”

“Just say what it is.”

Jack could see Naomi already straining to peer

around her mother's seat.

"Is it dead people?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"I want to see them."

"No, you don't."

"It won't bother me. I promise."

"I can't make you shut your eyes, but I can give you fair warning. This is the kind of thing you'll dream about, so when you wake up tonight crying and scared, don't call out for me to comfort you, because I warned you not to look."

Thinking, *Will there be a tonight to wake from?*

Jack drove on. They had been shot down, ten or fifteen of them, some killed outright, brainmatter slung into quivering gray-pink globules on the street. Others had managed to cover some ground before dying, the distance of their final crawl measured by swaths of purple-stained pavement and in one instance a long gray rope of gut like the woman had been tethered to the street. Jack glanced back, saw Naomi and Cole staring through the window, their faces pressed to the glass. His eyes filled up.

In the middle of town, they crossed a river that sourced from the mountains. In the summertime, in direct sun, it shone luminescent green and teemed

with rafters and fly-fishermen. Today, the water reflected the colorless, smoked-out sky. A body floated down the rapids under the trestle bridge, jostled in the current, and Jack spotted numerous others rounding the bend—a group of blindfolded children.

Main Avenue widened to four lanes. Burned, abandoned cars clogged the street. Out of the valley rose a hundred unique trails of smoke.

“It’s like an army came through,” Dee said.

They passed two fast-food restaurants, several gas stations, a fairground, a high school, a string of motels.

Jack pointed to a grocery store. “We should get more food.”

“No, Jack.”

“Keep going, Dad. I don’t like it here.”

A woman stumbled out of the supermarket parking lot and ran into the street, holding out her hands to the Land Rover as if willing it to stop.

“No, Jack.”

“She’s hurt.”

He braked.

“Goddammit, Jack.”

The Land Rover’s bumper came to rest ten feet

from the woman in the road.

Dee glared at him as he turned off the engine and opened his door and stepped down into the road. The doorslam echoed against an unnerving silence, disrupted only by a single sound Jack barely even registered with one unshattered eardrum—a baby wailing several blocks away.

He could see in the way the woman watched him approach that her eyes had witnessed pure horror in recent hours. He suddenly wished he'd never stopped the car, that he'd stayed on the other side of the windshield, because this was real, breathing agony standing before him. She sat down in the road. The intensity of her weeping like nothing Jack had ever heard, and he acknowledged the urge to dehumanize her, to shun sympathy. Too horrifying to identify with a human being who had reached this level of despair. Something contagious in their grief and loss. Her hair was dreadlocked with blood and her arms streaked red and her long-sleeved white tee-shirt stained like a butcher's apron.

Jack said, "Are you hurt?"

She looked up at him, eyes nearly swollen shut from crying. "How can this be happening?"

"Are they still here? In town?"

She wiped her eyes. "We saw them coming with

guns and axes. We hid in the closet. They came through the house, looking for us. I'd been in Mike's house before. He'd sung carols on our front porch. I'd taken his family Christmas cookies. He said if we came out they would do it quickly."

Jack squatted down in the road. "But you got out. You escaped."

"They shot at us as we ran out the back door. Katie was hit in the back. They were coming. . . I left her."

"I'm so sorry."

"I left her and I don't even know if she was dead."

Dee opened her door. Jack glanced back, said, "You want to come take a look at—"

"That's a lie. I'm a fucking liar. I know she wasn't dead because she was crying."

"We need to go, Jack."

"She was crying for me."

He touched the woman's shoulder. "Do you want to come with us?"

She stared back at him, her eyes glazing, mind drifting elsewhere.

"Jack, could we please leave this fucking town already?"

He stood.

"Katie was crying for me. I was so scared."

"Do you want to come with us?"

“I want to die.”

Jack walked back to the Land Rover and opened the door as the woman screamed.

“What happened to her?” Naomi asked.

He started the engine.

Drove around the woman in the road and turned up a sidestreet.

“Jack, where are you going?”

He pulled over to the curb and turned off the car and got out. The houses burned and smoking. A row of bodies in the street on the next block. Dee climbed out and walked around to the front of the car and stood facing him.

“Jack?”

“I heard a baby crying over here while I was talking to that woman.”

“I don’t hear a thing, Jack. Look at me. Please.”

He looked down at her. As beautiful to him as she had ever been standing in this charred neighborhood in this murdered town. He saw the pulsing of her carotid artery in her long and slender neck. She seemed intensely alive.

Dee pointed toward the Land Rover. “They’re our charge. Do you understand that? Nobody else.”

“You made me stop for the hospital patient last—”

“That was the doctor in me. I’m over it now. We

don't have much food or water. We're so vulnerable."

"I know."

"Jack." She wouldn't go on until he'd met her eyes. "I am holding my shit together by a very thin thread."

"Okay."

"I need you to make smart decisions."

"I know," he said, still straining to hear the cries of the baby.

North out of town. Out of the smoke and through a valley, its winding river marked by cottonwoods and the valley itself enclosed by red-banded cliffs and everything so purely lit under the lucid blue, *like a dream*, Jack thought. Or a memory. The way he still saw Montana that fall day all those years ago when he'd caught his first glimpse of Dee. The highway paralleled a narrow gauge railroad. They passed no other cars. Pastured cows raised their oblong heads to watch them speed by, and the air that filled the car carried the sweet, rich stink of a dairy farm. In the backseat, Naomi leaned on the door, listening to her iPod. Cole slept. For a second, it felt like one of those weekend trips to Colorado, and Jack did everything in his power to embrace the fantasy.

The road began to climb. Pressure building in



Jack's ears. The sky verging toward purple, and the air that rushed in through Dee's window growing cooler and redolent of spruce trees. On the mountainsides, the conifers were laced with acres of aspen. The summits stood treeless, all gray and broken rock patched with old snow. They passed a deserted ski resort. A livery for tourists to purchase horseback rides. The road steepened. They climbed past ten thousand feet through a stand of spruce and crested the pass.

A few miles up the road, they came to a second, higher pass through the mountains. Jack pulled over into the empty parking lot and turned off the engine. He and Dee got out and took a look around. Late morning. You could see for miles. The wind blew. Clouds amassing to the north. He took his BlackBerry out of his pocket. Powered it up. No service.

He opened his fly and urinated into the grass.

"Jack, there's a restroom right there."

"See anybody around?"

"Just because you can, huh?"

He zipped up, said, "Silverton's down in that valley over there."

Dee went to the car and came back with a pair of binoculars. She glassed the road from the pass to

where it disappeared into the forest several miles north and a few hundred feet below.

“Anything?” Jack said.

“Nothing.”

They rode down from the pass out of the high country and back into the forest and then out of it again. The road had been gashed out of a cliff and the drop off the right shoulder was a thousand feet down to a river that snaked through a canyon. The valley from which it flowed contained a small town dotted with brightly-painted buildings and a railroad yard and a gold-domed courthouse at the north end.

“Well, it isn’t on fire,” Jack said. He glanced over, saw Dee massaging the back of her neck. “Headache?”

“Yeah, and it’s getting worse.”

“You know what it is, don’t you?”

“The elevation?”

“Nope. I’ve got one, too.”

“Oh my God, you’re right. We’ve missed our morning coffee.”

They rounded a hairpin turn: three trucks parked across the road, six men sprinting toward the Land Rover, guns pointed, screaming at them to stop the

car.

“Jack, turn around.”

“They’re too close. They’ll open fire.”

“Won’t they anyway?”

“What’s happening?”

“Naomi, stay quiet, keep your headphones in, and don’t wake Cole.”

Jack still searched for a way out as the men closed in—a steep drop through trees over the right shoulder, an impossible climb up the mountainside off the left, and not enough room in this fast-diminishing increment of time to execute a three-point-turn and haul ass back the way they’d come.

Jack shifted into park. “Put your hands up, Dee.”

“Jack—”

“Just do it.”

The first man arrived training a bolt-action Remington on Jack’s head through the glass as the others surrounded the car.

“Roll it down,” he said. Jack lowered the window.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“Just north.”

“North?”

“Yeah.”

The man was bearded but young. Not even twenty-five, Jack thought. He wore a camouflage hunting

jacket. A braided goatee tied off with a dangling row of black beads.

Someone standing behind the Rover said, "New Mexico tag."

"Why are you up here? Who are you with?"

"No one, it's just us."

Another man walked over and stood by Jack's window. A patchier beard. Long black hair flowing out of his corduroy bomber hat.

He said, "There's a kid sleeping in the backseat. Their car's been shot to hell, Matt. They got supplies and shit in the back."

"We had to leave our home in Albuquerque last night," Jack said. "Barely made it out."

The man named Matt lowered his .30-.30. "You come through Durango this morning?"

"Yeah."

"We heard it got pretty fucked up."

"They burned it. Bodies everywhere." Jack watched the fear take up residence in the man's face. A sudden paling that made him look even younger than Jack had first suspected.

"It's bad, huh?"

"Biblical."

The others gathered around Jack's window. Cole sat up. "Are they mean, Daddy?"

“No, buddy, we’re okay.”

“Yeah, we’re cool, little man.”

The assembled men looked less like sentries than armed ski bums. Their weapons better suited to elk hunting than warfare—all toting high-powered rifles slung over their shoulders but not a pistol or shotgun to be seen.

“So you’re guarding the road into town?” Jack asked.

“Yep, and there’s another group stationed below Red Mountain Pass, trying to destroy the road.”

“Why?”

“There’ve been reports of a convoy of trucks and cars heading south from Ridgeway.”

“How many vehicles?”

“Don’t know. Most of Silverton’s already gone up into the mountains. Glad to see you driving a Land Rover, ’cause that’s really the only route left.”

“What route is that?”

“Cinnamon Pass to Lake City. And you should probably get going. It’s a bitch of a road.”

They rolled into the old mining town at midday and Jack pulled into a small grocery with several gas pumps out front. He sent Dee and the kids inside to scrounge for food while he flipped the lever and

prayed there was something left. There was. He topped off the Rover's tank, walked into the grocery. The cash register stood unmanned, the shelves stripped bare, the store pillaged.

He called out, "You finding anything?"

Dee from the back: "Slim pickings, although I did get a road map. Any gas left?"

"I filled us up." Jack grabbed two five-gallon gasoline cans off a shelf in the barebones automotive aisle and went outside to the pump and filled them up. He cleared out a spot amid the camping gear and lifted the red plastic cans one at a time through the open window of the back hatch. Inside the store again, it took him several minutes to find the plastic sheeting. He carried two boxes of it, a roll of duct tape, and the single remaining quart of 10w-30 motor oil back outside with him. Dee and the kids were already in the car when he climbed in.

"How'd we do?" he said.

"Three strips of jerky. A can of diced tomatoes. Box of white rice. Bottle of seasoning."

"Sounds like a meal."

Up Greene Street for several blocks. Most of the shops closed. No one out. The sky sheeted over with uniform gray clouds which had moved in so suddenly

that just a wedge of autumn blue lingered to the south, all the brighter for its dwindling existence. Jack turned into a parking space.

“I won’t be long.”

He left the car running and stepped into the sporting goods store. It smelled of waterproofing grease and gunpowder. Everywhere, racks of bibs and jackets patterned in every conceivable design of camouflage and mounted deer and elk heads with their impossible racks and a stuffed brown bear standing on its hind legs looking back toward an aisle of nets and fly-rods and hip waders. A burly-looking man with the girth of a drink machine stood watching him from behind the counter. He wore a flannel shirt, a vest flecked with renegade feathers of down, and he was pushing rounds into a revolver.

“What are you lookin for?”

“Shells for a twelve gauge and a—”

“Sorry.”

“You’re out?”

“I ain’t sellin any more ammo.”

The gun cases behind the counter had been emptied.

“Tell you what.” The man reached under the counter, brought out a sheathed hunting knife, and set it on the glass. “Take that. Best I can do. On the house.”

Jack walked to the counter. "I already have a knife."

"What kind?"

"Swiss Army."

"Good luck killin some son of a bitch with it."

Jack lifted the large bowie. "Thanks."

The storeowner flipped the cylinder closed and set to work loading a magazine.

"Are you staying?" Jack asked.

"You think I look like the type of hombre to let some motherfuckers run me out of my own town?"

"You should think about leaving. They wiped Durango off the map."

"Under advisement."

Someone pounded the storefront glass, and Jack turned, saw Dee frantically waving him outside.

When he pushed the door to the sporting goods store open, Jack heard a distant growl, a symphony of engines growing louder with each passing second, like the opening mayhem of a speedway race.

Dee said, "They're here."

As he reached to open his door, gunshots broke out in the south end of town and men were yelling and he glimpsed the lead trucks of the convoy already turning onto Greene Street. He jumped in behind the wheel and reversed out of the parking space and



shifted into drive. Fed the engine gas, the hotels and restaurants and gift shops racing by, Jack running stop signs, doing seventy by the time he passed the courthouse at the north end of town.

The road turned sharply.

Jack braked, tires squealing.

Dee said, "You know where you're going?"

"Sort of."

The road left town and went to dirt, still smooth and wide enough for Jack to keep their speed above sixty. It ran for a couple of miles above the river and then emerged into a higher valley. They passed ruined mines. Mountains swept up all around them, the craggy summits edging into the falling cloud deck. In the rearview mirror, Jack eyed the dust clouds a mile back, and when he squinted, raised the half dozen trucks contained within them.

They passed the remnants of another mine, another ghost town.

The road became rocky and narrow and steep.

"Jack, you have to go faster."

"Any faster, I'll bounce us off the mountain."

Naomi and Cole had unbuckled their seatbelts and they both sat up on their knees, facing the back hatch and watching the pursuing trucks.

"Get down, kids."

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to get shot, Naomi.”

“Jack, come on.”

“Are they going to shoot at me, Daddy?”

“They might, Cole.”

“Why?”

*Why.*

The road had gone completely to hell, the Rover’s right tires passing inches from a nonexistent shoulder that plunged a hundred and fifty feet into a stream boiling with whitewater.

“Dad, I’m cold.”

“I know, sweetie. I’m sorry.”

Snow starred the windshield. A signpost appeared in the distance. Beside the words, Cinnamon Pass, which had been engraved in the wood, an arrow pointed to a road that could hardly be called a road—just a single lane of broken rocks that switchbacked up the flank of a mountain into the clouds.

Jack took the turnoff. Snow blew in through the open windows. They climbed several hundred feet above the other road, above timberline, and as Jack negotiated the first tight switchback, that squadron of trucks emerged out of the mist below, cutting triangles of light through the falling snow.

Dee lifted the binoculars from the floorboard and

leaned out the window and glassed the valley. Even without magnification, Jack could see five of the trucks veer onto the turnoff for Cinnamon Pass.

“Why’s the one stopping?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Let me see. A man’s getting out.”

“What’s he—”

“Everybody get down.”

“What’s wrong?”

Something struck the Rover, and for a split second Jack thought the tires had thrown a rock.

A rifle shot echoed off the mountains.

“Get down on the floorboards.”

The Rover shook and pitched as Jack pushed the speedometer to ten miles per hour, maneuvering to avoid the largest, sharpest rocks that jutted out of the trail. The window at Naomi’s seat exploded in a shower of glass and everyone screamed and Jack shouted his daughter’s name and she said that she was okay.

Another rifle shot. They climbed into the base of a cloud, Jack thinking, *He’s aiming for the tires*, as a bullet punctured Dee’s door and ripped through his seat, inches from his back.

The mist thickened. The rocks had just been wet. Now they were frosted. The snow melting and streaking the windshield and pouring into the car

through the open windows. Jack thought he heard another shot over the engine, but when he glanced out Dee's window to where the valley should have been a few hundred feet below, there was only a blue-tinted mist cluttered with snowflakes that swirled and fell in disorienting profusion.

They climbed the mountainside, the road exposed, Dee and the kids still burrowed into the floorboards, Jack constantly checking the rearview mirror for headlights.

"Can we get up now?" Cole asked.

"Not yet."

"It hurts to stay like this."

The road leveled off and the Rover's headlights passed over another signpost: Cinnamon Pass Elevation 12,640 Feet. Several inches of snow on everything in this tundra world. No trees or shrubs but only rock and nothing visible beyond fifty feet through the fog and pouring snow, the light more like dusk than early afternoon. In some outpost of emotion, divorced from the horror of the moment, Jack found the isolated beauty of this pass heartbreaking. The kind of wild place his father had loved to take him when he was a boy.

He brought the Rover to a stop and turned off the

car and threw open his door.

“What are you doing, Jack?”

“Just checking things out. You guys can sit up now.”

He stepped down into the snow and shut his door. He strained to listen. At first, just the infinitesimal pattering of snowflakes falling on his shoulders, the ticking of the cooling engine, the wind, the invisible shifting of rocks on some obscured peak. Then he heard them—impossible to tell how far away, but the distant groan of engines became audible in the gloom below the pass, muffled by the snow. He got back into the car and cranked the engine and they went on. Jack shifted into four-wheel low. The road descending, the tires sliding on ice down the steeper grades. After two miles, shrubs appeared again. Then tiny, crooked fir trees. They dropped into a forest and a stream fell in beside the road. Still snowing here, but the snow had only begun to collect.

Jack turned off the jeep trail.

They went across a meadow and forded a stream and climbed up the bank into a grove of fir trees. He turned off the car and got out and walked back to the stream and stared across the meadow toward the road. The mist had all but dissolved in the trees. He looked back at the Rover, parked behind a grouping of blue spruce, then back to the road again. He

scrambled down the bank to the edge of the stream and had started to cross over to test the soundness of their hiding place from the meadow. The rumbling chorus of engines stopped him. He went back up the bank. Dee and Cole had gotten out of the Rover and were coming toward him. He waved them back. "The trucks are coming."

"Can they see us from the road?"

"I don't know." He glanced back at the meadow, imagined he could see the Rover's tire tracks in the dusting of snow, though he wasn't sure. The tread had definitely bitten into the soft dirt of the bank if the men in the trucks could see that far. The engines got quiet and then loud again. "Come on," he said. They jogged through the wet grass around the spruce trees. The Rover reeked of hot brake fluid. Jack saw Naomi lying down across the backseat, headphones in her ears. He knocked on the glass of Cole's window. She cut her eyes up at him and he held a finger to his lips and she nodded. They crouched behind the car.

Jack said, "I'm going to find a spot where I can watch the road."

"Can I come?"

"No, buddy, I need you to stay here and take care of Mama. I won't be far." He looked at Dee. "Be ready to run."

Jack jogged back toward the stream and ducked behind a boulder that rose to his shoulders. The trees dripping. Snowing hard. He could smell the spruce. The wet rock. Already the ground was white. He poked his head around the rock as the second truck emerged from the trees. It went alongside the meadow. He said, "There are no tracks to see, just keep moving, keep moving," and it kept moving as the third and fourth and fifth trucks rolled into view—Dodge Rams, snow-blasted except for the engine-warmed hoods and the heated cabs. He could see white faces through the fogged glass of the passenger windows. He ducked back behind the rock and sat down in the snow and studied the smooth motion of his watch's second hand. When it had made three revolutions, the engine noises had completely faded, and the only sound was the dripping trees. The pounding of his heart.

They unloaded their camping equipment from the back of the Land Rover and Jack unpacked their tent and read its instruction manual. Spent an hour trying to assemble the poles and unravel the mystery of how the tent attached to them. The snow was ankle-deep and still falling when he finally raised the four-man dome. They carried their sleeping bags and air

cushions over from the car and tossed them inside. Dee and the kids took off their wet shoes and climbed in.

“I’ll be in in a little while,” Jack said. “Warm it up for me.”

He zipped them in.

With the new hunting knife, Jack cut large squares out of the plastic sheeting. He wiped the snow off the windowframes, dried the wet metal with the sleeves of his shirt, and duct-taped the plastic squares over three windows on the right side of the car and a large rectangle over the back hatch. You couldn’t see anything distinctly through the plastic, so he taped a piece over the intact glass of Cole’s window as well.

He spent the rest of the afternoon picking Naomi’s windowglass out of the backseat and the floor mats. Reorganizing everything in the cargo area. He checked the oil and washer fluid and tire pressure. When he’d finished, he looked for something else to do, needing his hands to be busy, his mind in the moment. It still snowed. He thought the sky had imperceptibly darkened, the afternoon sliding toward dusk. He hacked some limbs off a dead spruce and snapped off a few clusters of brown needles toward



the base of the tree that had been shielded from the weather.

The stream was freezing. He picked a dozen fist-size rocks out of the water and stretched out his tee-shirt and loaded them all into the pouch it made. Inside the fire ring, he stacked wads of tissue paper and the browned spruce needles and a handful of twigs and enclosed them all in a framework of larger branches. Last fire he'd built had been at their home in Albuquerque the previous Christmas, and he'd cheated, used a brick of firestarter to get things going.

His hands trembled in the cold as he held the lighter to the tissue paper and struck a flame.

Later, he heard the tent unzip. Dee crawled out, stepped into her wet shoes. She walked over and stood beside him.

"I guess it literally takes the end of the world to get a family camping trip."

"I'm just trying to get a fire going so we can dry some stuff out."

A wisp of smoke lifted out of the pitiful pile of blackened twigs and half-burnt tissue paper.

"You're shivering. Come into the tent and get some

sleep. I have your sleeping bag ready for you.”

He stood, his legs cramping. He'd been squatting for over an hour.

“Are you hungry?” he said.

“Will you let me worry about dinner? Please. Go sleep.”

Jack abandoned his wet clothes in a pile in the tent's vestibule and crawled into his sleeping bag. He could hear Dee moving around outside and he could hear the snow falling down on the rain fly. He didn't stop shivering for a long time. His children slept. He reached over and held his hand to Cole's chest. Rise and fall. Rise and fall. Naomi lay on the other side of Cole against the tent wall. He leaned across, his hand searching out her sleeping bag in the darkness, then finally resting on her back. Rise and fall. Rise and fall.

When he woke it was pitch black and he thought he was in his bed in the guestroom in Albuquerque. He sat up and listened. He didn't hear his children breathing. He didn't hear anything but the pulsing in his left ear. He reached over in the dark. The sleeping bags empty. He almost called out for them, but then thought better of it. He dressed quickly in his cold, damp clothes and unzipped the vestibule and crawled

outside. It had stopped snowing, and his footsteps squeaked in the half foot of powder. Inside the Rover, light flickered through the plastic windows. He went over and opened the driver's door and got in. Everyone in their respective seats eating out of paper bowls. A candle on the center console. "Smells good," he said.

Dee lifted a bowl off the dashboard and handed it to him.

"It's probably cooled off. I didn't want to waste fuel keeping it warm."

Tomatoes and rice, heavily seasoned, with pieces of jerky mixed in. He stirred it up and took a bite. He could hear Naomi's iPod, and he wanted to tell her to turn it off. Ration the damn power so you can play it when you actually need a distraction. She'd forgotten to bring her charger, and when that battery died, the music was finished. But he said nothing. Pick your battles.

He glanced at his watch—a few hours later than he thought.

"This is good," he said. "Really good."

"I didn't like it," Cole said.

"Sorry, buddy. Beggars can't be choosers."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we don't have much food right now, so we

have to be thankful for what we do have.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Dee said, “Another truck went by while you were sleeping.”

“Was the light on in here?”

“No, I heard the engine coming in time to blow it out.”

Jack finished off the bowl of rice and tomatoes. He was still hungry, figured everyone else was, too. His head pounding from caffeine deprivation.

“Where’s the water?”

Dee handed him a jug from the floorboard at her feet. He unscrewed the cap, tilted it back.

They put Naomi and Cole to bed and went across the stream together and out into the meadow. The sky had cleared. Stars shone like flecks of ice and the serrated ridge of a distant peak glowed brighter and brighter as the moon came up behind it.

Dee said, “I need to know that you have a plan, Jack.”

“We’re alive, aren’t we?”

“But where are we going? How will we stay alive?”

They walked into the road, the snow tracked through, and it suddenly dawned on Jack what they’d done.

“Shit. We aren’t thinking.” He pointed at the meadow where their footprints led back into the trees, advertising the location of their camp.

Dee pushed him hard enough to make him stumble back. “Tell me how we’re going to survive this. Tell me right now, because I don’t see it. Pure luck we weren’t all murdered today.”

“I don’t know, Dee. I couldn’t start a fucking fire with matches and tissue paper this afternoon.”

“I need to know you have a plan. Some idea of what —”

“Well, I don’t. Not yet. I just know we can’t stay here after tonight. That’s all I know.”

“Because of food.”

“Food and cold.”

“That’s not good enough, Jack.”

“What else do you want from me?”

“I want you to be a fucking man. Do what you don’t do at home. Take care of your family. Be there. Physically. Emotionally—”

“I’m trying.”

“I know. I know you are.” She sounded on the verge of tears. “I just can’t believe this is happening.”

Cole woke up crying in the night. Jack unzipped his sleeping bag, let the boy crawl inside with him.

“What’s wrong, buddy?” he whispered.

“I had a dream.”

“You’re okay. It wasn’t real.”

“It felt real.”

“You want to tell me what it was about? Sometimes, when you talk about them, nightmares don’t seem so scary.”

“You’ll be mad at me.”

“Why in the world would I be mad at you?”

“You told me not to look.”

“Did you dream about those people we saw in the street today?” He felt his little boy’s head nodding.

“You said you wouldn’t comfort me because you told me not to look.”

He wrapped his arms around Cole. “You feel that?”

“Yes.”

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry. I will always comfort you, Cole.”

“Can I stay in your sleeping bag?”

“You promise to go right back to sleep?”

“I promise.”

“Try not to think about all the bad stuff, all right? It’ll only give you more nightmares. Think about a happy time.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. When were you last really happy?”

The boy was quiet for a minute.

“When we went to see Grandpa.”

“You mean last summer?”

“Yeah, and he let me run through the sprinkler.”

“Then think about that, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jack held his son as the pleasing weight of sleep settled back over him, and he was beginning to dream again when Cole whispered something.

“What’d you say, buddy?”

The boy turned over and put his mouth to Jack’s right ear: “I have to tell you something else.”

“What?”

“I know why the bad people are doing it.”

“Cole, quit thinking about that stuff. Good thoughts, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jack closed his eyes.

Opened them again.

“Why, Cole?”

“What?”

“Why do you think the bad people are doing it?”

“Cause of the lights.”

“The lights?”

“Yeah.”

“What lights? What are you talking about?”

“You know.”

“Cole, I don’t.”

“The ones I saw that night I stayed at Alex’s house, and we went outside real late with all the people.”

Something like an electrical impulse shuddered through him. Jack shut his eyes and held his palm to the shallow concavity of his son’s chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

THEY slept long into the following day. They slept like people with no good reason to wake. As if the world to which they went to bed might become reconciled to itself, if they could only sleep a bit longer.

When Jack drove back across the stream the water came halfway up the tires. It was early afternoon, and except for where the trees threw shade, the snow had disappeared from the meadow and the ground was supple. They turned onto the road. It descended. Muddy and crisscrossed with rivulets of brown water in the sunlight. Still snowpack in the trees. They came down out of the snow and the pure stands of spruce into aspen.



In the late afternoon, the road widened and became smoother and ran along the shore of a large mountain lake. Up ahead, Jack spotted a car on the side of the road—a luxury SUV with all four doors flung open.

He sped past at fifty miles per hour.

A quick glimpse: Parents. The woman naked, her thighs red. Three children. All facedown, unmoving in the grass.

Jack glanced in the rearview mirror. Naomi and Cole hadn't noticed.

He looked over at Dee—she dozed against the plastic window.

The road went to pavement at dusk and they entered a mountain hamlet. Everything had been burned, the streets lined with the charred skeletons of houses and cars and gift shops, Jack thinking it must have been razed several days ago because nothing smoked. The air that streamed through the vents smelled like old, wet ash. His family slept. There was a field in the center of town near the school, browned and overgrown, with rusted, netless soccer goals at each end. At first, Jack thought someone had torched a mound of tires in the middle of that field until he saw a single black arm sticking up from the top of the heap.

They stabbed north into the night up a twisting, two-lane highway through the foothills of the San Juans, and they did not pass another car.

Jack pulled off the road into a picnic area beside a reservoir. They popped the back hatch of the Rover, and Dee fired up the propane-fueled camp stove and cooked a pot of chicken noodle soup from two old cans. They sat near the shore watching the moonrise and passing the steaming pot. After a night in the mountains, it felt almost warm.

"I like this better than the tomatoes and rice," Cole said. "I could eat this every day."

"Careful what you wish for," Dee said.

Jack waved off his turn with the pot and stood up. He walked down to the edge and dipped his fingers in the water.

"Cold, Dad?" Naomi asked.

"Not too bad."

"Why don't you go for a swim then?"

He glanced back, grinning. "Why don't you?"

She shook her head. He cupped a handful and tossed it back at his daughter, the water like falling glass where the moonlight passed through it.

Her screams echoed off the hills across the

reservoir.

They drove west along the water.

“Where are we stopping tonight?” Dee asked.

“I wasn’t planning to. I’m not tired, and I think it might be safer to travel at night.”

It was noisy in the car, the plastic windows flapping. In the backseat, Naomi had her headphones in, eyes closed. Cole played with a pair of Hot Wheels, racing them up the back of Jack’s seat.

Jack said, “I was studying the roadmap you picked up in Silverton. I think we should head into northwest Colorado. It’s sparsely populated. Middle-of-nowhere type of place. What do you think?”

“And then where?”

“Day at a time for now. How you doing?”

She just shook her head, and he knew better than to push it.

The road traversed a dam and climbed. They followed the rim of a deep canyon. Deer everywhere, Jack stopping frequently to let them cross the road.

He pulled over after a while and the slowing of the car roused Dee from sleep.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to pee.”

He left the car running and got out and walked to

the overlook. Stood peeing between the slats of a wooden fence, looking across the canyon, which by his reckoning couldn't have spanned more than a couple thousand feet. Down in the black bottom of the gorge, invisible in shadow, he could hear a river rushing.

The road turned north away from the canyon. They rode through dark country, no points of houselight anywhere, but the moon bright enough on the pavement for Jack to drive the long, open stretches without headlights. Miles to the south, the horizon put forth a deep orange glow. He watched the fuel gauge falling toward a quarter of a tank and thought about the phantom cries of that baby he'd heard the day before. Wondering, if they were real, what had become of it.

Late in the night, Jack reached over and patted Dee's leg. She stirred from sleep, sat up, rubbed her eyes. He said nothing, not wanting to wake the kids, but he pointed through the windshield.

City lights in the distance.

Dee leaned over and whispered into his ear, her breath soured with sleep, "Can't we just go around?"

He shook his head.

“Why?”

“We’re on fumes.”

“We have ten gallons in back.”

“That’s for emergencies.”

“Jack, it’s an emergency right now. Our life has become a fucking emergency.”

The town was empty, but then it was almost three in the morning. The air that poured through the vents bore no trace of smoke and the houses seemed untouched, if vacant, a few even boasting porchlights.

At the intersection of highways, Jack pulled into a filling station. He stepped out and swiped his credit card and stood waiting for the machine to authorize the purchase, the night air pleasant at this lower elevation. While the super unleaded gasoline flowed into the tank, he went across the oil-stained concrete into the convenience store. The lights were on, and the empty coolers along the back wall hummed in the silence. He perused the four aisles, all heavily grazed, and emerged with a package of sunflower seeds and another quart of motor oil. The pump had gone quiet, the ticker frozen at a hair past eleven gallons. He squeezed the handle, but the lever was still depressed, the tank run dry.

With the hearing in his left ear still impaired, it took

him a few seconds to get a fix on the sound. A mote of light tore up the highway toward the filling station, accompanied by the watery growl of a V-twin, two pair of headlights in tow a quarter mile back, and Dee already shouting inside the car as he yanked out the nozzle and screwed on the gas cap.

Dee had his door open and he jumped in, hands shoved into his pockets, digging for the keys.

“Jack, come on.”

Naomi sat up, blinking against the overhead dome light. “What’s going on?”

Jack fumbled the set of keys, finally got the right one between his thumb and forefinger, and fired the engine as the cycle roared up on them. He went straight at the black and chrome Harley, the rider cranking back on the throttle to avoid a collision, the bike popping up on one wheel as it surged out of the way.

Jack turned out into the highway. Back tires dragging across the pavement as he straightened their bearing.

“Get the shotgun, Dee.”

“Where is it?”

“In the way back.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt and crawled over the console into the backseat.

“Mama?”

“Everything’s okay, Cole. I just need to get something. Go back to sleep.”

Jack forced the gas pedal to the floorboard. Above the din of engine noise and the plastic windows flapping like they might rip off, Jack registered the vibration of the cycle in his gut.

“Hurry up, Dee.”

“I’m trying. It’s wedged under your pack.”

He looked in the rearview mirror—darkness specked with the diminishing lights of town. He punched off the headlights. The speedometer needle holding steady at one hundred and ten though they still accelerated. The pavement silvered under the moon and glowing just enough for him to stay between the white shoulder lines.

Dee crawled back into her seat.

“Jesus, Jack. How fast are we going?”

“You don’t want to know.”

A piece of fire bloomed and faded in the side mirror, and the square of glass exploded.

“Get down.”

The gunshot was lost to the flapping windows, but the V-twin wasn’t.

“Give me the gun, Dee.” She hoisted it up from the floorboard, barrel first. “I need you to steer.”

The cycle screamed just a few feet behind their bumper, only visible where its chrome caught glimmers of moonlight.

His foot still on the gas, Jack turned back, vertebrae cracking, and aimed through the back hatch and pumped the twelve gauge. The thunder of its report sent a spike through his left eardrum and filled the Rover with the blinding, split-second brilliance of a muzzleflash. Through the shredded plastic of the back hatch, the cycle had disappeared.

Bullets pierced the left side of the Rover, glass spraying the backseat.

Jack spun back into the driver seat, his right ear ringing, and took the steering wheel and eased off the gas.

The cycle shot forward and then its taillight blipped and it vanished.

Cole screaming in the backseat.

“Naomi, is he hurt?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I think he’s just scared.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Help him.”

“Where’s the motorcycle, Jack?”



“I don’t see it. Steer again.”

She grabbed the wheel and Jack pumped the shotgun. “I still can’t hear too well,” he said. “You have to tell me when you—”

“I hear it now.”

He strained to listen, couldn’t see for shit through the plastic window, but he did hear the cycle’s engine, the throttle winding up, and then the guttural scream was practically inside the car.

“Hold on and stay down.”

He turned back into the driver seat and clutched the wheel and hit the brake pedal and something slammed into the back of the Rover, the sickening clatter of metal striking metal, Jack punching on the headlights just in time to see the cycle turning end over end as it somersaulted off the road into darkness, throwing sparks every time the metal met the pavement, the rider deposited on the double yellow thirty yards ahead, the man sitting dazed and staring at his left arm which dangled fingerless and unhinged from his elbow, his unhelmeted head scalped to the bone.

Jack struck the man at fifty-five. The Rover shook violently for several seconds, as if running a succession of speedbumps, and then the pavement flowed smoothly under the tires again.

He killed the lights and pushed the Rover past a hundred, watching Dee's side mirror for tailing cars. When the road made a sharp turn, he slowed and eased off the shoulder down a gentle embankment and turned off the car.

Cole wept hysterically.

"It's okay, buddy," Jack said. "It's okay. We're all right now."

"I want to go home. I want to go home now."

Dee climbed into the back and swept the broken glass off the leather seat and took Cole up into her arms.

"I know," she whispered. "I know. I want to go home, too, but we can't just yet."

"Why?"

"Because it's not safe."

"When can we?"

"I don't know yet."

Jack glanced back and before the overhead light cut out, saw Naomi's chin quivering, too.

He opened his door, said, "I'll be right back."

He crawled through the grass up the embankment and lay on his stomach in the shadow of an overhanging cottonwood at the shoulder's edge, his heart beating against the ground, listening. He could still hear Cole crying, Dee hushing him like she had

when he was a baby. He wiped his eyes. Hands shaking. Cold. The highway silent.

They came so suddenly he didn't have time to roll back down the hill—two cars tearing around the corner, no headlights, tires squealing, one of them passing within a foot of his head.

They raced on into darkness, invisible, the groan of their engines slowly fading.

Jack had dust in his eyes and grit between his teeth and the odor of burnt rubber was everywhere.

\* \* \* \* \*

AT dawn, they entered the largest city they'd seen since Albuquerque. The lights were still on. Gas stations beckoned. They undercut an empty interstate, Jack keeping their speed above sixty, and soon the city dwindled away behind them, him watching the image of it shrink in the only reflection left—the cracked side mirror on Dee's door.

They crested a pass. A small weather station beside the road. Fragile light on this minor range of green foothills. That city thirty miles back and to the south, its lights glittering in the desert. A distant range to the west with still a few minutes of night left to go.

Jack was beyond exhaustion, shoulder aching from the twelve-gauge kick, his children awake, staring into the plastic of their respective windows. Catatonic. Dee snored softly.

They rode down from the pass and out of the pines into empty, arid country. As the sun edged up on the world, Jack saw the building in the distance. He took his foot off the accelerator.

The motel had been long abandoned, its name bleached out of the thirty-foot billboard that stood teetering beside the road. Dee stirred and sat up as Jack veered off the highway onto the fractured pavement.

“Why are you stopping?”

“I have to sleep.”

“Want me to drive some?”

“No, let’s stay off the road today.”

He pulled around to the back of the building and turned off the engine.

Stillness. The cathedral quiet of the high desert.

Jack looked at the gas gauge—between a quarter and a half. He studied the odometer.

“Five hundred and fifty-two miles,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“How far we’ve come from home.”

The room had two double beds. A dresser. An old television with a busted screen. Graffitied walls. Tied-off and shriveled condoms on the carpet and a bathtub full of shattered beer bottles. Jack carefully turned back the rotting covers so as not to disturb the dust, and they lay their sleeping bags on the old sheets—Jack and Cole on one bed, the girls on the other—and fell asleep as the sun rose.

He sat up suddenly. His wife stood over him. Dust trembling off the ceiling. A glass ashtray rattling across the bedside table.

“Jack, something’s happening.”

They parted the curtains and climbed over the rusted AC wall unit through the open windowframe. Midday light beat down on the desert and the ground vibrated beneath their feet, the inconceivable noise shaking jags of glass out of other windows, doors quivering in their frames. They walked over to the motel office and Jack ventured a glance around the corner of the building.

On the road, a convoy rolled by—SUVs, luxury sedans, beater trucks with armed men riding in the beds, jeeps, fuel trucks, school buses, all moving by

at a modest speed and raising a substantial cloud of dust in their collective passing.

Jack turned back to Dee, said into her ear, "I don't think they can see our car from the road."

Another five minutes crept by, Jack and Dee standing against the crumbling concrete of the motel until the last car in the convoy had passed, the drone of several hundred engines fading more slowly than Jack would have thought.

Dee said, "What if we'd been traveling south on this road?"

"We'd have seen them from miles away."

"With the binoculars?"

"Yeah."

"What if the kids and I were sleeping and you weren't looking through the—"

"Don't do this, Dee. They didn't see us. We weren't on the road."

"But we could have been." She bit her bottom lip and stared east toward a rise of low brown hills. "We have to be more careful," she said. "We have to always be thinking the worst. I can't watch my children —"

"Stop it."

Dee walked along the brick and peered around the corner.

“Still see them?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. Sun’s reflecting off all that chrome.”

Jack didn’t hear the engines anymore.

Dee said, “They’re getting organized, aren’t they?”

“Seems that way.”

He stepped forward and looked with her. The convoy miles away now, like the long and shining trail of a snail.

Naomi and Cole slept in the motel room. Jack and Dee sat outside on the concrete walkway, watching the light slant across the desert.

Dee held her BlackBerry in her hand, said, “Still no signal.”

“Who you trying to call, your sister?”

She started to cry, and he didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing, just put his arm around her for the first time in months. He thought about the last time he’d spoken to his father. A week ago. Sunday morning on the telephone. Sitting on the screened back porch and watching the lawn sprinklers water the fescue. Sipping on a mug of black coffee. They’d talked about the coming election and a movie they’d both seen and the World Series. When the time had come to hang up, he’d said, “I’ll talk to you next weekend, Pop,” and his father had said, “Well, all right

then. You take care, son.” Same way they always ended their phone calls. What killed him was that it hadn’t, in any way, felt like the last time they would ever speak.

They changed out of their three-day-old clothes, and Dee lit the campstove and brought the last two cans of old vegetable soup to a simmer. Sat in the darkening motel room passing the cooling pot and the last jug of water.

At dusk, he stood in the middle of the road with a pair of binoculars, glassing the high desert.

South: nothing.

North: no movement save a handful of pumpjacks that dotted the landscape and ominous lines of black smoke ascending out of the far horizon.

He turned at the sound of approaching footfalls. Naomi stepped into the road and pushed her chin-length yellow hair out of her face. The dark eyeliner she always wore had faded, she’d taken the silver studs out of her ears, and he thought how she looked like his little girl again yet older, her features sharpening into the Germanic, Midwestern prettiness that had begun to desert Dee. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d let him hold her, or if he was



honest, the last time he'd wanted to. He'd lost sight of his daughter amid the angst and the Goth façade, and he saw, not for the first time, but for the first time with clarity, how in the last two years he'd become a stranger to the two most important women in his life.

"What's going on?" Naomi asked.

"Just having a look around."

She stood beside him, dragged the soles of her black Chuck Taylors across the pavement.

"What do you think about all this?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"You worried about your friends?"

"I guess. You think Grandpa's okay?"

"No way to know. I hope he is." He wanted to put his arms around her. Restrained himself. "I'm really proud of how you're taking care of your brother, Na. As proud as I've ever been of you. Your being brave is helping Cole to be brave."

She nodded, but he could see tears shivering in her eyes. He drew her suddenly into him and she wrapped her arms around his waist and cried hard into his chest.

With the Rover packed, they climbed in and took their seats and Jack started the engine. The desert deepening from blue into purple as they pulled out of

the motel parking lot and into the highway, the stars fading in and the moon rising over the hills.

They went north without headlights, and within a half hour, had come upon the town. Everywhere, houses burned, and the dead lay in the road and the sidestreets and the front yards. Jack made himself stop counting.

“Don’t look out the windows,” he warned, and this time, his children listened.

The town had lost power.

Jack punched on the headlights.

“Don’t.”

“I can’t see.”

Smoke streamed through the lightbeams and filled the car.

The highway became Main Street. They passed between old buildings and a couple of restaurants and a dark marquee advertising a pair of films that had been released months ago.

A few blocks past the downtown, he turned off the highway into the parking lot of a grocery store and stopped the Rover in the fire lane by the entrance.

“Jack, please, let’s just get the hell out of here.”

“We’re out of food. Almost out of water. I have to look.”

He turned off the car and reached under his seat,

grabbed the Glock. "Dee, you have the flashlight?"

She set it in his lap.

"Don't leave, Daddy."

"I'll be right back, buddy." He touched Dee's leg. "Anything happens, you lay on this horn and I'll be here in five seconds."

The automatic doors stood a foot apart. He squeezed through, hesitating. Every part of him protesting against this. He flicked on the Mag-Lite and made himself go on, thinking how it didn't smell anything like a grocery store should. A tinge of rust and rot hanging in the air. He dislodged a cart from the brood of buggies and set the gun in the child's seat. Started forward, the wheels rattling, one squeaking, his light playing off the registers. He passed through the self-checkout aisle. No sound but the distant voltage in his left ear which hummed like a substation.

He pushed the buggy toward produce. The shelves bare but still carrying the smell of vegetables and fruit. Ten feet ahead, a man lay beside empty wooden crates. The blood around him shimmering off the linoleum like black ice under the lightbeam. Jack stopped the cart. There were others behind this man and though he wouldn't put his light directly on them,

he stared at what the shadows didn't hide. The closest: a woman facing him with her eyes still open, long yellow hair matted to the gore that had been bludgeoned out of her head.

He picked a cluster of overripe bananas off the floor, the only offering of produce, and pushed the cart between the dead. The wheels went quiet, greased with blood. Dark shoeprints tracked through double doors into the back of the store. He took the gun and left the cart and pushed through them, swinging his light across pallets of stock that had already been scavenged of anything resembling food. Only packages of toilet paper remaining. He shined the light on the concrete floor and followed the bloody tracks to where they ended. There were over a hundred brass casings and spent shotgun shells in the vicinity of the freezer's big silver door, and massive quantities of blood had leaked out from underneath it. He started to pull it open. Stopped himself.

He walked back out into the store and put his hands on the cart. The rear of the supermarket stunk of spoiled meat. As he rounded a corner into the first aisle, the cart bumped into a young child who had been hacked to pieces, a single neck tendon shy of a full decapitation. Jack turned and vomited into a

naked shelf, stood spitting until his mouth quit watering. He'd seen a few frames of horror since Thursday night, but nothing like this. He tried to shove it into the back of his unconscious, but its shape wouldn't fit anywhere. Beyond all comprehension.

He went on. Searching the shelves for anything, finding nothing but a gallon of water and more bodies to steer around. He rolled past empty glass cases that had held frozen meals, and then turned into the last aisle of the store, the beam of his Mag-Lite illuminating someone sitting up against a shelf lined with cartons of room-temperature milk. The teenage boy's eyes opened, milky and failing to dilate at the onslaught of light. He held his belly as if trying to keep something in.

Jack left the cart and walked over to the boundary of where the blood had pooled. He squatted down. The boy's respirations coming labored and sodden. He ran his tongue across his dried and cracking lips and said, "Water."

Jack went to the buggy and rolled it back over and set the flashlight beside the gun. He broke the seal and twisted off the cap and held the mouth of the jug to the boy's lips. He drank. A skinny, long-legged kid. Black denim jeans and a western shirt. He turned away from the water and drew a breath.

“You got to take me to Junction. I ain’t going to make it through tonight.” The boy looked off into the darkness. “Where’s Mama?”

“I don’t know.”

Jack got up.

“Where you going?”

“I have my family waiting outside.”

“Don’t leave me, mister.”

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“You got a gun?”

“What?”

“A gun.”

“Yeah.”

“You can shoot me.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“I can’t just sit here in the dark. Please shoot me in the head. You can do that for me. I’d be so grateful. You got no concept how this hurts.”

Jack lifted the jug of water.

“Don’t leave me, mister.”

He took the gun from the cart and jammed it down the back of his waistband. He tucked the bananas under his right arm and grabbed the flashlight and started walking up the aisle toward the front of the store.

“You son of a bitch,” the boy called after him, crying

now.

They stopped at a filling station on the outskirts but the pumps were dry. Jack checked the oil and washed the filthy windshield and they headed north out of town into the high desert. The night clear and cold and nothing else on the road save the occasional mule deer. They ate the bananas—too soft and reeking of that oversweet candy stench of fruit that has just begun to turn—and Jack let them split his share. The two hamlets they passed through barely warranted the black specks they'd been assigned on the map—tiny ranching communities, burned and vacated. The most substantive structure for miles was a grain mill, looming above the desert like some improbable skyline.

Jack pulled off onto the side of the road to let Cole and Naomi have a bathroom break, and when the kids were out of the car, Dee said, “What’s wrong, Jack?”

He looked at her, glad when the overhead light cut off.

“Nothing. I mean, you know, besides everything.”

“What’d you see in that grocery store?”

He shook his head.

“Jack. We together in this?”

“Of course. That doesn't mean you need to have me putting things in your head that you can't get rid of.” As his eyes readjusted to the darkness, he looked through the windshield at a range of hills in the east. Heard a sudden shriek of laughter from Cole that almost made him smile.

Dee said, “Don't push me away. I need to share this experience with you. I want to know what you know, Jack. Every single thing, because there's comfort in it. I need that.”

“Not this, you don't.”

Five miles on, Jack pulled off the road again, said, “Give me the binoculars.”

“What's wrong, Dad?”

“I saw something.”

“What?”

“Lights. Everyone just sit still and don't open your doors.”

“Why?”

“Because the interior lights will come on, and I don't want anyone to see where we are.”

“What if they see us? What will happen?”

“Nothing good, Cole.”

Dee handed him the binoculars and he brought the



eyecups to his eyes. At first, nothing but black, and he thought maybe the focus had been jarred, but then he picked them up again, stretched along the road like a stateless strand of Christmas lights.

“You just sighed. What is it, Jack?”

He moved the knob, pulled everything into focus.

“The convoy.”

“Oh, God.”

“I think they’re moving away from us.”

“Can you tell how far?”

“Maybe ten miles. I don’t know.”

“And you’re sure they’re not coming toward us?”

He lowered the binoculars. “Let’s wait here awhile. Track their movement. Make absolutely certain.”

Jack glassed the convoy through the windshield, watching its slow progression away from them while the kids played Rock, Paper, Scissors.

Within the hour, the lights had vanished.

Heat blasted out of the vents to check the frigid air that streamed through rips in the plastic windows, Naomi and Cole bundled in their sleeping bags and huddled miserably together.

Just before midnight, Jack turned off the highway onto a dirt road and punched on the headlights.

They'd gone several miles when Dee leaned across the center console, and then back into her seat, pushing a discreet exhalation through her teeth that no one but her husband would have caught. The opening move in a battle they'd fought before.

"What?"

"You see the light?" she said.

"Yes, I see it."

"Do you think there's going to be a gas station out here?" She gestured toward the windshield and the expanse of empty country beyond the glass, devoid of even a spore of manmade light.

"It just came on a minute ago."

"It means we're out of gas, darling-heart."

"No, it means we can still go for twenty-five miles. It's called a reserve tank."

He could feel the heat of her stare even in the dark.

She said, "We have ten gallons of gas sloshing around back there, and I don't understand why you won't—"

"Dee, it's—"

"Oh my God, if you say it's for emergencies one more. . ." She turned away from him. Stared into the plastic of her window. Jack on the brink of just pulling over, an act of appeasement he would never have considered under any other circumstance, when the

headlights grazed a dark house.

He turned into the gravel drive and parked beside a powder-blue Chevy pickup truck from another time, headlights firing across a brick ranch with white columns on the porch.

“Let’s not stop here, Jack.”

“We have to take a look.”

Jack and Dee followed the stone path to the house and stepped up onto the front porch and knocked on the door. They waited. Heard nothing on the other side.

“Nobody’s home,” Jack said.

“Or maybe they saw a man walking up to their house with a shotgun and they’re waiting on the other side with a fucking arsenal.”

“Always the pessimist.” He knocked again and tried the door.

Jack pried a large, flat piece of sandstone out of the walkway and lobbed it through the dining room window. They crouched in the cedar chips and listened. A stalactite of glass fell out of the framing. Silence followed.

“I’ll go in,” Jack said, “make sure it’s safe.”

“What if it’s not?”

He reached into his pocket, handed her the keys. "Then you get the hell out of here."

Standing in the dining room, the first thing to strike him was the warmth. He walked into the kitchen. The refrigerator humming. He opened it. Jars of mayonnaise and other storebought condiments and a mason jar of pickled beets and something wrapped in tinfoil. He went to the sink and turned on the tap. Water flowed.

Dee sat in the Rover in the driver seat, her hands on the steering wheel. He opened the door, said, "It's empty and they have power."

"Food?"

"There's some stuff in the cabinets." He looked into the backseat. "Na and Cole, I want you to bring all the empty jugs inside."

Jack went around to the side of the house. He unsheathed his bowie and sawed off the nozzle to the garden hose. He unwound it and cut a six-foot length of green tubing. The opening to the Chevy's gas tank was next to the driver-side door, a silver cap speckled with rust that took some hard cranking to unscrew. He'd already poured the five-gallon cans into the

Rover, and they sat open on the gravel drive while he threaded the hose through the hole. It touched the bottom of the tank, the smell already wafting out of the end of the tube as he brought it to his lips.

The gas was oily in his mouth—sharp, pungent, and dirty. He spit it out and jammed the hose into the first gas can, his eyes watering, throat burning from the fumes.

Jack walked past the eight jugs of water lined up on the kitchen island. He leaned down into the sink and held his mouth under the open tap for a long time but there was no flushing of the gasoline which lingered in the back of his throat like persistent fog.

“How’d we do?” Dee asked.

He stood up, lightheaded. “Six gallons.”

“You all right?”

“I just need about fifty breath mints.”

Naomi said, “Come look what we found, Dad.”

He followed them across the wood laminate floor to a sliding glass door behind the breakfast nook. The vertical blinds had been swept back and he looked through the glass into a square of domesticated yard, moonlit and bordered by desert. He saw a dilapidated swingset, a pair of lawn chairs shaded by an umbrella, and closer to the house, a thirty-foot steel

antenna mast.

Naomi flipped through the channels on a mammoth television set that looked like it had occupied the same patch of shag carpeting for thirty years. Every station drowned in static.

Jack lifted a telephone, held the receiver to his ear. Silence.

They walked down the hallway, the hardwood groaning under their footsteps.

“Can’t we turn some lights on? I don’t like it dark.”

“Lights might attract someone, Cole.”

“You mean like someone bad?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you think these people went?” Naomi asked.

“No telling. Probably just left their home like we left ours.”

Jack shined his flashlight through the first doorway they passed. A bedroom with two trophy cases and a large photograph above the headboard—a teenage boy riding an enraged bull.

They went on.

Naomi said, “Something smells bad.”

Jack stopped. He smelled it, too. Sharp enough to overpower the gasoline overload in his nasal cavity.

Dee said, "Kids, let's go back to the kitchen."

Naomi said, "What's wrong?"

"Go with your mother."

"Come on, guys. Jack, be careful."

"Is it—"

"Na, think about your brother before you say another word."

"What about me?"

"Come on, Cole, let's go with Mom."

Jack watched his family retreat and then turned back toward the closed door at the end of the hall, the smell intensifying with each step. He breathed through his mouth as he turned the doorknob and shined the light inside.

A man and a woman lay in bed. White-haired. Seventy-something. Framed photographs of what he presumed were their grown sons resting on their stomachs. The woman had been shot through the forehead, and the man cradled her to himself, a hole in his right temple, his right arm outstretched and hanging off the bed, a revolver of some caliber on the floor below his hand. The white comforter darkened with blood. Above the bed, Jack put his light on a series of fifty-one photographs that, in the lowlight, looked almost identical. He moved closer. The last photograph of the montage was a recent portrait of

the couple on the bed, the man wearing an oversize tuxedo that swallowed him whole, the woman squeezed into a ragged wedding dress many sizes too small, and as Jack ran his light back through the portraits, the couple grew younger and their wedding clothes fit better and their smiles brightened toward something like hope.

Jack walked into the kitchen, found Dee and Naomi standing around the island, drinking from glasses of ice water. In the living room, Cole flipped through channels of static on the television.

“Everything all right?” Dee said.

“They weren’t murdered. He shot her and then himself.”

“Can I see?”

“Why would you want to, Na?”

She shrugged. “You saw it.”

“I had to make sure everything was safe for us. I wish I hadn’t seen it.”

Jack found the radio setup in the den—a low-band rig, microphone, headphones, power meter. The room had no windows, so he turned on the desk lamp and settled into a cracking leather chair. The amateur radio license hanging on the wall above the



equipment had been issued to Ronald M. Schirard, callsign KE5UTN.

“What’s all this stuff?” Naomi said.

“It’s a ham radio.”

“What’s it do?”

“Let’s you talk to people all over the world.”

“Isn’t that what cell phones are for?”

Dee said, “You know how to use this?”

“I had a friend in high school whose Dad was a ham. We’d sneak down into the basement at night and use his radio. But this equipment looks way more sophisticated.” He turned on the transreceiver and the microphone and put on the headset. The radio had been tuned to 146.840 megahertz, and he didn’t tinker with it, just keyed the microphone.

“This is KE5UTN listening on the 146.840 machine.”

Thirty seconds of silence.

He restated the callsign and repeater identification, then glanced up at Dee. “This may take some time.”

Dee came back after a half hour and set a cup of coffee on the desk. Jack didn’t remove the headphones, just said, “Thanks, but I can’t go through caffeine withdrawal again.”

“Anything?”

“Not a word.”

An hour later and still no response, he finally reached for the dial to change the receiver frequency.

A voice crackled over the airwaves.

“KE5UTN? This is EI1465.” Heavy Irish accent.

Jack keyed the mic. “This is KE5UTN. Who am I speaking with please?”

“Ron? Thank God, I thought something had happened.”

“No, this is Jack Colclough.”

“Where’s Ron Schirard? You’re using his callsign.”

“I’m in his house, on his station.”

“Where’s Ron, mate?”

Jack heard the door open behind him. Glanced back, saw Dee walk in. He said, “You a friend of Ron’s?”

“Never met him, but we’ve been talking on the radio going on nine years.”

Jack hesitated.

“Mr. Colclough? Is my modulation off?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but Ron and his wife are dead. Where are you, if I may ask?”

The silence in the headphones went on for a long while, and the voice finally returned much softer.

“Belfast. What are you doing in Ron’s house?”

“We fled our home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, three days ago, and just stopped here to look for supplies. Cell phones don’t work. Or landlines. There’s no internet. Do you have any information about what’s happening? Has it spread worldwide?”

“No, it’s only the lower forty-eight states of America, southern Canada, and northern Mexico. There aren’t too many reports coming out of the affected region, but you’ve heard about New England?”

“We’ve heard nothing.”

“Boston and New York have been devastated. Total chaos. Astronomical death tolls. There’s a handful of videos circulating—movies shot on mobile phones. Streets clogged with bodies. People trying to flee the cities. Real doomsday stuff. Are you and your family okay?”

“We’re alive.”

“You’re lucky to be in a low population-density area.”

Jack glanced up at Dee, said, “You should really be keeping a lookout in case someone comes.”

“Naomi’s on the front porch watching the road.”

Jack keyed the mic. “Has anyone figured out what’s causing this?”

“Well, there have been a lot of crazy theories put out there, but over the last day or so, everyone’s been

focusing on this atmospheric phenomenon that happened over America about a month ago.”

“You mean the aurora?”

“Exactly. The talking-heads have been blathering on about mass extinctions, that this is what wiped out the dinosaurs, that it triggered a latent genetic defect in a percentage of the population. Mind you, I’m just regurgitating what I’ve heard on the tele. They’re probably full of shite.”

“Has everyone who witnessed the aurora become affected?”

“I don’t know. Did you see it?”

“No. My family. . .we slept through it.”

“Lucky for you, I guess.”

“Look, where’s the closest safe zone?”

“Southern Canada. They’re setting up refugee camps there. How far away are you?”

Jack felt something in him deflate. “A thousand miles. Anything else you can tell us about what’s going on? We’re blind here.”

“Nothing that would cheer you up.”

“I don’t think I got your name.”

“Matthew Hewson. Matt.”

“I’m sorry about your friend, Matt.”

“Me, too. How many souls in your family, Jack?”

“Four. I have a son and a daughter.”

“When I go to mass tonight, I’ll light a candle for each of you. I know it isn’t much, but maybe it is.”

Jack opened the door and walked out onto the front porch. Naomi sat on the steps, and he eased down beside her. The night cold. A lonely cricket chirping out in the yard and not another sound on the high desert. Not even wind.

“Mom told me we have to leave.”

“Yeah. I just don’t think we’re safe here. This house is the only—”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t want to sleep in a house with dead people in it.”

“Well, there’s that.”

“I went and looked at them.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Why’d they kill themselves you think? ’Cause of what’s happening?”

“Probably.”

“That’s weak.”

“The Schirards had put together a good life for themselves, Na. Been married a lot of years. They were old. Not capable of running. I’m not sure I’d call what they did weak.”

“Would you do it?”

“Of course not. I have you and Cole and—”

“But if something happened to us and it was just you. Or just you and Mom.”

He stared at his daughter in the darkness. “That isn’t something I ever want to think about.”

Dee and the kids loaded water jugs into the Land Rover, and Jack poured the six gallons he’d siphoned out of the Chevy into their gas tank. They were underway a little after three. Traveling north with the highbeams blazing like flamethrowers to ward off the riot of deer and antelope that continually shot across the road. It hadn’t rained here in weeks, possibly a month, and from the gravel, their passage raised a trail of moonlit dust that never quite seemed to settle.

They climbed a series of plateaus and crossed into Wyoming at four. The road went back to pavement and Dee cracked open the pickled beets, fed one to Jack, handed the glass jar into the backseat.

“What is this?” Naomi asked.

“Beets. Try one.”

She sniffed the open jar and winced. “That’s disgusting, Mom.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yeah, but that’s like, haven’t-eaten-in-a-week, on-the-verge-of-death food.”

“Cole?”

“He’s asleep.”

Jack kept watching the eastern sky, and when he saw the first hint of light his stomach released a shimmer of heat.

Dee must have noticed, too, because she said, “Where are we going to stop?”

“Other side of Rock Springs.”

“We have to go through another city?”

“Last one for a long time.” Jack glanced into the backseat, said, “Look.” Cole had slumped over into Naomi’s lap, and his sister leaned against the door, asleep, her fingers tangled up in his hair.

A tremor shook the Rover.

Jack studied the dash.

“We’re losing oil,” he said. “Engine’s running hot.”

“How many quarts do we have?”

“Two, but I don’t want to use them yet.”

Dawn crept over a bleak waste of countryside. They could see for seventy miles to the east—a treeless, waterless, uninhabitable piece of ground.

Jack punched off the headlights.

\* \* \* \* \*

THEY rolled through Rock Springs. The city had lost power. Streets empty. No one out. Jack eased to a stop at a vacant intersection, purely out of habit, and stared for a moment at the dark traffic signals. He lowered his window, listened to the harsh idle of the V8. Killed the engine.

Silence flooded in, and not just the dawn-quiet of a waking town.

“Everyone left,” he said.

Across the street, the automated doors of a City Market grocery store had been leveled, like a truck had driven through. Jack opened his door, stepped down onto the road, dropped to his knees, stared up into the Rover’s undercarriage.

Nothing to see in the poor light but a tiny pond of oil on the asphalt whose reflection of the morning sky shook with each new drop.

The highway north out of Rock Springs was a straight shot into high desert. There were mountains to the northeast that after seventy miles became mountains to the east. The sun appeared behind them



and made the quartz in the pavement glimmer.

“We should find a place to stop,” Dee said. “It’s almost seven.”

“Minute you see a tree, speak up.”

They drove on, Jack thinking this was such a quintessential highway of the American West. Long vistas. Emptiness. Desert in the foreground, mountains beyond. Both sagebrush and snow within eyeshot.

When Dee drew a sudden breath, Jack felt his stomach fall, on the verge of asking for the binoculars, but he didn’t even need them now as the sun cleared that thirteen thousand-foot wall of granite twenty miles to the east and struck the oncoming procession of chrome and glass.

Dee took the binoculars out of the glove box, glassed the desert.

“How far?”

“Five, ten miles, I don’t know.”

Jack stepped on the brake, brought the Rover almost to a stop, and veered off the highway into the desert.

“What the fuck, Jack?”

“See what we’re heading for?”

Several miles east, a butte rose two hundred feet above the desert floor.

“Are you crazy?”

“We’d never make it back to Rock Springs on less than a quarter of a tank, which is where we’re at.”

“So you’re going to take us behind that butte.”

“Exactly.”

“Then go faster.”

“Christ, you’re bossy. I’m going as slow as I can so we don’t raise a trail of dust they can follow.”

Naomi lifted her head off the door. “Why’s it so bumpy?”

“We’re taking a detour, angel.”

“Why?”

“Cars coming.” Jack swerved to miss a sagebrush.

“We making a dust cloud?”

Dee opened her door, leaned out, glanced back. “Little one.”

The butte grew bigger in the windshield—sunburnt strata of rock that rose to a flat-topped summit. The desert running like warped and shattered concrete under the tires and shaking the Rover all to hell.

“We’re running really hot,” Jack said. Kept searching for the road in his side mirror, kept forgetting the mirror had been shot out two nights ago.

“Where are they?” Naomi asked.

“We can’t see them from here,” Dee said. “Hopefully, they can’t see us.”

They rode into the shadow of the butte, Jack skirting the circumference until they reached the back side which had been fired into pink by the early sun.

He slammed the Rover into park, turned off the engine.

“Binoculars.”

Dee handed them over and he threw open the door and hopped down onto the hardpan. Ran up the lower slope of the butte, his quads burning after ten steps, perspiration beading on his forehead after twenty.

Where the slope went vertical for the last fifty feet, he traversed along the edge of the cliff band and had just caught his breath when the highway came into view.

His knees hit the dirt. Jack lowered himself and propped his elbows on the ground, still cold from the previous night. Brought the binoculars' eyecups to his eyes, pulled the highway into focus, and slowly traced it north.

Footfalls behind him.

He inhaled a severely faded waft of Dee's shampoo as she collapsed panting in the dirt.

“You see them?” she asked.

He did. An eighteen-wheeler led the convoy, puffing gouts of black smoke into the air and followed by a train of cars and trucks that might have been a mile

long. Five hundred engines sounded otherworldly carrying across the desert.

“Jack?”

“Yeah, I see them.”

“What about our trail?”

He lowered the binoculars and looked to where he thought they'd cut across the desert and lifted them to his eyes again. First thing he fixed upon were a pair of antelope standing motionless with their heads raised, staring toward the noise of what was coming.

He adjusted the focus knob, spotted their tire tracks.

“I see our path. I don't see any dust.”

The convoy had begun to pass the point on the highway where they'd turned off.

Jack said, “They're not stopping.”

He lowered the binoculars.

“What are we going to do, Jack, when the gas runs out?”

“We'll find some before that happens.”

“You said there aren't any other cities for a—”

“We'll have to get lucky.”

“What if we don't—”

“Dee, what do you want me to say? I don't know what's going to—”

“Look.” She grabbed the binoculars from him and

turned his head toward the ribbons of dust that were unspooling across the desert behind two trucks.

Jack descended the butte at a sprint, Dee calling after him, but he didn't stop until he reached the Rover.

Popped the cargo hatch, grabbed the shotgun, felt confident he'd replaced the spent shell yesterday afternoon at the motel. Wondered if that meant he had eight rounds, though he couldn't be sure.

"Dad?" Naomi said.

"Cole awake?"

"No."

"Wake him."

"Are people coming?"

"Yes."

Dee arrived breathless as he opened his door and took the Glock from underneath the driver seat and a handful of twelve-gauge shells from the center console.

"Jack, let's just get in the car and go. Make them catch us."

He jammed the shells into his pocket.

Cole whined, "I'm hungry."

Jack thinking this was one of those choices where if you took the wrong road, there'd be no chance to undo it. They'd be dead. His son and his daughter

and his wife and him too if he was so lucky.

“Jack.”

He looked over Dee’s head to where the desert sloped up to the base of the butte.

“Naomi, you see that large boulder fifty yards up the hill?”

“Where?”

Jack punched through the plastic window and tore it off the door. “There.”

“Jack, no.”

“Take your brother up there and hide behind the rock. No matter what happens, what you see or hear, don’t move, don’t make a sound, until we come get you.”

“What if you don’t?”

“We will.”

“I’m hungry,” Cole cried, eyes still half-closed, not fully awake.

“Go with your sister, buddy. We’ll eat something when you come back.”

“No, now.”

“Get him up that hill, Na, and keep him with you.” He faced Dee, her eyes welling.

“You sure about this, Jack?”

“Yes.” What a lie.

Naomi dragged Cole out of the car, but the boy fell

crying to the ground, and he wouldn't get up.

Jack squatted down in the dirt.

"Look at me, son." He held the boy's face in his hands.

"I'm hungry."

He slapped Cole.

The boy went clear-eyed and hushed, stared at his father, tears running down his face.

"Shut up, and go with your sister right now, or you're going to get us all fucking killed." He'd never sworn at his son, never laid a hand on him before.

Cole nodded.

Naomi helped her brother to his feet and Jack watched as they jogged up the slope together, hand-in-hand. Jack looked at his wife. "Come on."

They ran south for sixty or seventy yards, and then Jack pulled Dee down behind a piece of rock the size of a minivan that had calved off from the butte in another epoch.

Already Jack could hear the growl of an approaching engine.

Dee visibly trembling.

A Jeep appeared around the corner of the butte, kicking streamers of dust in its wake as the driver downshifted.

"Where's the other truck, Jack?" He glanced back

toward the Rover, didn't see it coming.

"Stay here."

"Where are you going?"

The Jeep sped toward them on a trajectory that would bring it past the boulder by twenty or thirty feet.

He stood. "Here." Handed her the Glock. "Don't move from this spot."

Jack racked the slide and stepped out from behind the boulder and ran. Three men in the Jeep, and the one in back standing on the seat and holding onto the roll bar and a rifle, his long black hair blowing back. Jack slid to a stop in the dirt and pulled the stock into his shoulder and fired before they ever saw him. The driver started bleeding from several holes in his face and the long-haired man fell backward out of the Jeep into a sagebrush. Jack pumped the shotgun and got off another round as the Jeep drew even with him, registered a muzzleflash from the front passenger seat at the same instant the buckshot punched the third man out of the doorless Jeep, which veered sharply away and accelerated into the desert, the driver's head bobbling off the steering wheel.

Dee shouted his name, and as he turned, fire blossomed in his left shoulder, coupled with a wave of nausea. A Ford F-150, beat to hell and coated in dust, rounded the north side of the butte. Jack



sprinted back up the slope to Dee and crouched down beside her.

“How in the world did you just do that?” she asked.

“No idea.”

He dug two cartridges out of his pocket and fed them into the magazine tube and jacked a shell into the chamber.

The F-150 skidded to a stop beside the Rover. Two women jumped down out of the bed. Two men climbed out of the cab.

“Take this.” He gave her the shotgun, took back the Glock.

“You’re bleeding.”

“I know, I’m—”

“No, I mean you’re really bleeding.”

“Run like hell toward those mountains. When they follow, lay down in the dirt and let them get close and then open fire. Shoot, pump, shoot. Pump it hard. You won’t break it.”

“Jack.” She was crying now.

“They are going to kill our children.”

She stood and started down the slope into the desert.

He looked down at the Glock in his hand which felt so small and held not a fraction of that devastating twelve-gauge reassurance.

Then he was running across the slope, couldn't feel his legs or the bullet in his shoulder, nothing but the shudder of his heart banging against his chest plate. He saw Dee being chased by two people into the desert and a man with a large revolver following a woman uphill toward the boulder where his children hid.

The man stopped and looked at Jack and raised his gun.

Between the two of them, they exchanged a dozen rounds that never came close to hitting anything.

The slide on Jack's .45 locked back, the man struggling to break open the cylinder of his revolver, and the woman had nearly reached the boulder. She was thirty-something, blond, and holding an ax under the blade. Naomi and Cole still huddled behind the rock, Jack twenty yards away and moving toward them now at a dead run.

Shotgun reports tore out of the desert.

The woman disappeared behind the far side of the boulder and Jack screamed at his daughter to move over the roar of another shotgun blast.

The blonde emerged behind his children, hoisted the ax.

He crashed into her at full speed and drove her hard into the ground. Grabbed the first decent rock

within reach and before he'd even thought about what he was doing, he'd broken open the woman's skull with seven crushing blows.

Jack wiped her blood out of his eyes, picked up the Glock, and went to his children.

Naomi wept hysterically, holding her brother in her arms, shielding him.

The woman twitched in the dirt.

Down on the desert, someone groaned as they dragged themselves across the ground.

*Not Dee.*

Jack pushed the slide back and stepped out from behind the boulder with the empty Glock. The man stood ten feet downslope, pushing rounds into the open cylinder of his revolver, and when he looked up his eyes went wide like he'd been caught stealing or worse. Jack trained the Glock on him, a two-handed grip, but he couldn't stop his nerves from making it shake.

The man seemed roughly the same age as the blonde, who Jack could hear moaning behind the rock. He was sunburned and stinking. Lips chapped. Wore filthy hiking shorts and a pale blue, long-sleeved tee-shirt covered in rips and holes and dark sweat- and bloodstains.

"Drop it."

The revolver fell in the dirt.

“Move that way,” Jack said, directing him up the hill away from the gun. “Now sit.”

The man sat down against the boulder, squinting at the new sun.

“Naomi, you and Cole come here.” He glanced over his shoulder as he said it, glimpsed a small figure moving toward them on the desert—Dee. In the morning silence, he could still hear that Jeep heading toward the mountains, the noise of its engine on a steady decline.

The man glared at Jack. “Let me help Heather.”

Naomi came around the boulder, struggling to carry Cole who whimpered in his sister’s arms.

“Go put him in the car, Na.”

“Is Mom okay?”

“Yes.”

“I want to see Heather.”

Naomi looked at the man as she moved past. “Why? She’s dead. Just like you’re going to be.”

The man called for her, and when Heather didn’t answer, his face broke up and he buried it in the crook of his arm and wept.

Jack’s left shoulder had established a pulse of its own. Lightheaded, he eased down onto a rock, keeping the Glock leveled on the man’s chest.

“Look at me.”

The man wouldn't.

“Look at me or I'll kill you right now.”

The man looked up, wiped his face, tears cutting streaks of red through the film of dirt and dust.

“What's your name?”

“Dave.”

“Where you from, Dave?”

“Eden Prairie, Minnesota.”

“What do you do for a living?”

It took him a moment to answer, as if he were having to sift back through several lifetimes.

“I was a financial advisor for a credit union.”

“And this morning, out here in the desert, you were going to kill my children.”

“You don't understand.”

“You're fucking right I don't understand, but if you explain it to me right now, you won't die.”

“Can I see her first?”

“No.”

Dave stared for a split second at Jack—a look of seething hatred that vanished as fast as it had come.

“Heather and I came out several weeks ago with our friends on a backpacking trip near Sheridan. Up in the Big Horns. We camped at this place, Solitude Lake. Little knoll a couple hundred feet above the

water. Our first night there, we had this crazy supper. Pasta, bread, cheese, several bottles of great wine. Smoked a few bowls before bed and crashed. The lights woke me in the middle of the night. I got Heather up, and we climbed out of our tent to see what was happening. Tried to wake Brad and Jen but they wouldn't get up. We laid down in the grass, Heather and me, and just watched the sky."

"What did you see?" Jack asked. "That turned you into this?"

The man's eyes filled up. "You ever witnessed pure beauty?"

"You're out of your mind."

"I saw perfection for fifty-four minutes, and it changed my life."

"What are you talking about?"

"God."

"You saw God."

"We all did."

"In the lights."

"He is the lights."

"Why do you hate me?"

"Because you didn't."

"Were those your friends in the Jeep?" Jack asked, though he already knew the answer. As Dave shook his head, Jack felt a molten-liquid mass coalescing in

the pit of his stomach. "You murdered them."

Dave smiled, a strange and chilling postcard of glee, and he was suddenly on his feet and running, four steps covered before Jack had even thought to react.

The full load of double aught buckshot slammed into Dave's chest and threw him back onto the ground. Dee stood holding the smoking shotgun, still trained on Dave who was trying to sit up and making loud, gasping croaks like a distressed bird. After a minute, he fell back in the dirt and went into silent shock as he bled out.

Jack struggled onto his feet and walked over to Dee.

"You're really hurting," she said.

He nodded as they started back down the slope toward the Rover and the F-150.

"I need to see your shoulder. Do you think the bullet's still in there or—"

"It's in there."

They approached the vehicles.

Dee said, "Wish we could take the truck. At least it has windows."

"We will take its gas."

"You kept the hose from the Schirards' house?"

"Yeah."

In the backseat of the Rover, Naomi cradled her brother in her arms, rocking him and whispering in his ear.

“Get the gas cans out of the back.”

The F-150 was black and silver under the layers of dust. Jack pulled open the passenger door with his right arm and stepped up into the cab. It smelled of suntan lotion. Trash cluttered the floorboards—empty boxes of ammunition, empty milk jugs, hundreds of brass shell casings.

He tugged the keys out of the ignition.

Back outside, he unlocked the gas cap.

“How much is in there?” Dee asked.

“I didn’t look at the gauge.” He took the hose from her and worked it through the hole. “Where’s the can?”

“Right here.”

He could feel a cool trickle meandering down the inner thigh of his left leg, wondered how much blood that meant he’d lost.

“You okay, Jack?”

“Yeah, I just. . .a little lightheaded.”

“Let me help with that.”

“I’ve got it. Just unscrew the cap.”

“It is.”

“Oh.”



As Jack brought the hose to his lips, a voice from the truck disrupted the fog in his head.

“Eighty-five, come back.”

Jack found the walkie-talkie inside the glove compartment.

“Eighty-five and Eighty-four, we’ve got Sixty-eight through Seventy-one headed back your way to check on things. If you’re already en route, advise, over.”

Jack pressed talk. “We’re in route.”

Another voice cut in, strained with pain, barely a whisper. “This is Eighty-four. . .oh, God. . .send help. . .please.”

“I didn’t copy that, over?”

Jack dropped the radio and climbed out. “That was the driver of the Jeep. We’re leaving.”

“Without the gas?”

“There isn’t time.”

He staggered over to the Rover, pulled open the door, slid in behind the wheel.

“We need gas, Jack. We’re under a quarter of a—”

“They’re sending four vehicles. Gas won’t help us when we’re dead.”

She ran back to the Ford and grabbed the tubing and the empty cans, tossed everything into the back of the Rover, and slammed the hatch.

“I’m driving,” she said.

“Why?”

“You’re in no shape.”

She had a point, his left shoe filling up with blood. He crawled over into the front passenger seat and Dee climbed in and shut the door, cranked the engine.

“Na, get you and Cole buckled in—”

“Just fucking go,” Jack said.

They started back across the desert, and Jack leaned against the door and tried to focus on the passing landscape instead of the fire in his shoulder. The pain was becoming unmanageable and sickening. He must have let slip a moan because Naomi said, “Daddy?”

“I’m fine, honey.”

He closed his eyes. So dizzy. Gone for a while and then Dee’s voice pulled him back. He sat up. Microscopic dots pulsating everywhere like black stars.

“Binoculars,” she was saying. “Can you look down the highway?”

She’d set them in his lap, and he lifted the eyecups to his eyes. Took him a moment to bring the road into focus through the driver side window.

The glint of sun off the distant windshields was unmistakable.

“They’re coming,” he said. “Still a ways off. Couple miles, maybe.”

The awful jarring of the desert disappeared as Dee turned onto the highway.

“Don’t do your safe, gas-mileage conserving acceleration,” he said. “Floor it and get us the hell out of here.”

The motor sounded harsh and clattery as they sped north, and Jack kept fighting the impulse to lean over to see the fuel gauge since the concept of unnecessary movement ran a bolt of nausea through him.

“What’s the gas situation?” he finally asked.

“Little under a quarter.”

“How fast you going?”

“Eighty-five.”

Jack opened his eyes and stared through the windshield—empty desert to the west, jagged mountains to the east. Overcome with the thought, the truth, that they’d reached the end of their five days of running. They were going to use up the last of their gas on this highway in the middle of nowhere and then those four trucks would show up and that would be the end of his family. His eyes filled up with tears and he turned away from Dee so she wouldn’t see.

The smell of smoke roused Jack off the door.

“Where are we?”

“Pinedale.”

The tiny western community had been cremated, the honky-tonk Main Street littered with burned-out trucks and debris from looted stores. Near the center of town, a line of corpses in cowboy hats sitting along the sidewalk like gargoyles, charred black and still smoking.

“Fuel light came on a minute ago,” Dee said.

“That was bound to happen.”

“How you holding up?”

“I’m holding.”

“You need to keep pressure on your shoulder, Jack, or it’s going to keep bleeding.”

They broke out of the fading smoke and Dee accelerated. The morning sky burned blue overhead, oblivious to it all.

Jack straightened and glanced back between the seats—nothing to see through the plastic sheeting that hyperventilated over the back hatch.

“I don’t like how we can’t see the road behind us,” he said. “Pull over.”

Three miles out of Pinedale, Dee veered onto the shoulder and Jack stumbled out of the Rover. Heard the incoming engines before he’d even raised the

binoculars to his face—a dive-bomber wail like they were being pushed to the limits of their performance capabilities.

He jumped back into the front seat, said, “Go,” and Dee shifted into drive, hit forty before Jack had managed to shut his door.

“How far?”

“I didn’t even look. Where’d you put the shotgun?”

“Backseat floorboard.”

“Hand it to Daddy, Na.”

Jack took the Mossberg from his daughter, had to yell over the straining engine. “How many times did you shoot it, Dee?”

“I don’t know. Four or five. I wasn’t keeping count.”

Jack flipped open the center console, grabbed a few shells, started feeding them in, the pain brilliant with every twitch of the deltoid in his left shoulder.

“Na, climb into the way back and peek through those holes. See if you can spot whatever’s coming.”

He reached under his seat, grabbed the roadmap. Opened it across his lap to the Wyoming page and traced their route north out of Rock Springs through Pinedale.

“There’s a turnoff coming up, Dee. Highway 352. Take it.”

“Where’s it go?”

"Into the Wind Rivers. Dead-ends after twenty miles or so."

"Oh my God, I see the trucks."

"How far, Na?"

"I don't know. They're small, but I can see them. Getting closer for sure."

"Why would we take a dead-end road, Jack?"

"Because they can see us and run us down on these long, open stretches. Go faster."

"We're doing ninety."

"Well, do a hundred. If they catch us before the turnoff, it's over."

"I think I see it."

They screamed toward a road sign.

"You're about to miss it," Jack said.

She stepped on the brake and made the turn at thirty-five, swinging wide into the oncoming lane, the Rover briefly on two wheels.

"Nice," Jack said.

Through the fist-size hole in his plastic window, he stared back down the highway, saw four vehicles streaking toward them. Inside of half a mile, he would've guessed.

"You see them?" Dee asked.

"Yeah. Get us up in those mountains as fast as you can."

The highway shot through the last bit of desert before the mountains, and Jack could smell the heat of the engine and the sagebrush screaming by.

At a hundred miles per hour, they ripped through a ghost town—three buildings, two of them listing, a derelict post office.

The foothills lifted out of the desert less than a mile away, and already they were climbing.

“How’s the fuel gauge, Dee?”

“We’re on the empty slash.”

The road cut a gentle turn away from the foothills and passed through a grove of cottonwoods. They sped alongside a river and into a canyon, the colder, pine-sweetened air streaming through the plastic windows.

Jack said, “Start looking for a place to pull over.”

“Trees are too tight here.”

“Na, would you climb into the back again? When we make our move, we need to be certain they can’t see us.”

The sun blinked through the trees in shards of blinding light.

Jack leaned against the door again, felt Dee take hold of his hand.

“Talk to me, Jack.”

“I don’t feel like talking.”

“Because of the pain?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t see them yet,” Naomi yelled.

“Cole all right?” he asked.

“Sleeping if you can believe it.”

Into a meadow, the frosted grasses sparkling under the sun, the road straight for a quarter mile.

As they reentered the woods on the other side, Naomi said, “They’re just now coming into the meadow.”

“How many, sweetie?”

“Four.”

“You feel that, Jack?”

“What?”

“Engine just sputtered.”

He struggled to sit up.

Leaned back over.

Vomited into the floorboard.

“Jack, is there blood in it?”

“I don’t know.”

He sat up, focused on the passing trees instead of the acid burn in the back of his throat.

When they rounded the next hairpin curve, Jack saw a corridor through the pines—not a road or a path, just a little space between the trees.

“There, Dee. See it?”



“Where?”

“There. Slow down. Just left of that boulder. Drive off the road right there.”

Dee steered into the trees.

The violent jarring launched Jack into the dashboard, something struck the undercarriage, and by the time he was back in his seat, nose pouring blood, Dee had pulled the Rover into a shady spot between several giant ponderosa pines.

She killed the engine and Jack opened his door and stumbled out.

Easy to see the path they'd blazed through the forest—saplings severed, pale tire tracks in the trampled grass.

A couple hundred yards through the trees, four trucks raced by, and Jack stood listening to the roar of their engines, which after ten seconds, quieted down to a distant idling that went on and on, Jack listening, inadvertently holding his breath while his shoulder throbbed like a second heartbeat.

Dee walked over.

“They're wondering if we've gotten ahead of them, or pulled a fast one,” he said. “If they're smart, they'll send two trucks up the canyon and two trucks back to the meadow to wait.”

“But they don't know we're out of gas,” Dee said. “If

they think we doubled back, maybe they'll keep going all the way to the highway.”

The engines went silent.

Naomi called out to Jack.

He spun around. “Shhh.”

“You think they’ve moved on?” Dee whispered.

“No. They’re listening for the sound of our engine. Go get the guns.”

They walked as far back into the woods as Jack could manage—barely fifty yards—and lay down in a bed of pine needles.

“Dee,” Jack whispered.

“What?”

“You’ve got to listen for what’s coming, okay? I have to rest now.”

“That’s fine.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Just close your eyes.”

Jack turned over onto his right side, and he tried to listen for approaching footsteps but kept passing in and out of consciousness as the sun moved over the pines and made a play of light and shadow on his face.

The next time he woke the sun was straight overhead and he could hear Dee telling Cole a story.

He sat up. His head swirled. Looked down at the pine needles, some of which had become glued together with blood. He felt feverish and cold, and soon Dee was there, easing him back onto the forest floor.

He opened his eyes, tried to sit up, thought better of it. Dee sat beside him and the sun was gone. Through the pines, the pieces of sky held the rich blue of late afternoon.

“Hi there,” she said.

“What time is it?”

“Four-fifteen. You’ve been sleeping all day.”

“Where are the kids?”

“Playing by a stream.”

“Nobody came?”

“Nobody came. You’re thirsty, I bet.” She unscrewed the cap from a milk jug and held it to his mouth. The coldness of the water stung his throat, ignited a fierce and sudden thirst. When he finished drinking, he looked up at his wife.

“How am I doing, Doc?”

Shook her head. “I stopped the bleeding, but you’re not so hot, Mr. Colclough.” She reached into the first aid kit, cracked open a bottle of Tylenol. “Here. Open.” Dumped a handful of pills onto Jack’s tongue, helped him wash them down. “I have to get that bullet

out, and I need to do it before we run out of daylight.”

“Fuck.”

“Jack, there’s worse people you could be stuck with in this situation.”

“Than Wifey, MD?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re a GP. When’s the last time you even held a scalpel? Med school? I mean, do you even have the tools to—”

“Really, Jack? You want me to tell you the gory details of what I’m about to do, or you want to turn your head away and let me do my thing?”

“You can do this?”

She squeezed his hand. “I can. And I have to or you’ll get an infection and die.”

Jack lay flat on his back, his head turned away from his left shoulder, wishing for unconsciousness.

“Jack, I need you to be as still as you possibly can.”

Dee cut away his shirt.

“Using my Swiss Army knife?”

“Yep.”

“You’re going to sterilize it?”

“I’m afraid your health insurance plan doesn’t cover sterilizations.”

“That’s hilarious. Seriously—”

“It’s already done.”

“What with?”

“A match and an iodine pad. I’m going to wipe down your shoulder now.”

Felt like ice on a flaming wound as she cleaned the dried blood and gunpowder from the entry hole.

“How’s it look?” he asked.

“Like somebody shot you.”

“Can you tell how far in it went?”

“Please let me focus.”

Something moved inside his shoulder. There was pain, but nothing like he’d feared.

Dee said, “Shit.”

“First-rate bedside manner. What’s wrong?”

“I thought maybe I could do this easily. Just pull the bullet out with these plastic tweezers.”

“That sounds like a super plan. Why can’t you do it?”

“I can’t get at it yet.”

“Fuck, you’re going to cut me.” Jack heard the snap of a blade locking into place. “Big blade? Small blade?”

“Think about something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like what we’re going to have for dinner.”

And he did think about it. For four seconds.

Pictured the jar of pickled beets in the Rover and it made him want to cry. All of it—lying here in the woods in extraordinary pain without food and the day leaving them and nowhere to go and no way to get there— and then the knife entered his shoulder in a revelation of searing pain.

“Holy motherfuck—”

“Hold still.”

She was really going after it, and Jack made a crushing fist, fighting back a surge of nausea as he tried to ask if she saw the bullet yet, if she could get at it now, desperate for some indication that this would be ending soon please God, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he descended into a merciful darkness.

When he came to, Dee was crouched over him, headlamp blazing and Cole and Naomi beside her looking on. She was lifting a piece of string attached to a needle and smiling. She looked exhausted.

“You passed out you big baby.”

He said, “Thank God for that. Please tell me you got it.”

Naomi held up a squashed mushroom of lead between her fingers.

“I’m going to make you a necklace so you can wear

it.”

“You must have read my mind, sweetie.”

He groaned as Dee ran the needle through his shoulder again and tightened the knot.

“I know it hurts, but I have to finish.” She started another stitch. “I really had to cut you to get it out. You lost two, maybe three pints of blood, which is right on the verge of not being okay.”

He woke often during the night, freezing even inside his sleeping bag. The stars shone through the pines, and he was caught up in a fever dream—crawling toward a stream and dying of thirst, but every time he reached the water and cupped a handful to his mouth, it turned to ash and the wind took it.

Once, he woke and it was Naomi’s voice that came to him in the dark.

“It’s okay, Daddy. You’re just having a bad dream.”

And she brought the jug of water to his lips and helped him drink and she was still there, her hand against his burning forehead, when he sank back down into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

HE registered the sun on his eyelids. Pulled the sleeping bag over his head, let his right hand graze his left arm.

The sickening heat had gone out of it.

Cole's laughter erupted some distance away in the forest.

Jack opened his eyes and pushed away the sleeping bag and slowly sat up.

Midday light.

The smell of sun-warmed pine needles everywhere.

Wind rushing through the tops of the trees.

Dee inspected his left shoulder. "Looking good."

"What about all that blood I lost?"

"Your body's making it back, but you need to be drinking constantly. More water than we have. And you need food. Particularly iron so you can remake those red blood cells."

"How are the kids?"

"Hungry. Na's been amazing with Cole, but I'm not sure how much longer she can keep it up."

"How are you?"

She looked back at the Rover. "Think it'll start?"

"Even if it does, we might have a gallon of gas left. Maybe a cup. No way to know."

"We can't just sit here and wait."



“We could head back toward the highway, or keep going up the canyon. See how far we get.”

“Jack, we’re not going to find anything, and you know it.”

“That’s a real possibility.”

“We need more gas.”

“We need a new car.”

“If we don’t find something, Jack, if we’re still in these mountains tonight and we have no way to travel anywhere except on foot, which you don’t have the strength for, it’s going to get very bad very fast.”

“You want to pray?”

“Pray?”

“Yeah, pray.”

“That’s really pathetic, Jack.”

The engine cranked on the first attempt, though when Dee shifted into reverse an awful racket jangled to life under the hood. She backed them out of the grove and took it slow through the trees toward the road.

“Which way, Jack?”

“Up the canyon.”

“You sure?”

“Well, we know what’s back toward the highway—nothing.”

She turned onto the road and eased through a gentle acceleration. They'd torn the plastic windows out and the noise of the engine precluded any communication softer than shouting. Jack glanced into the backseat, saw Naomi and Cole sharing the jar of beets. Winked at his son, thinking he looked thinner in the face, his cheekbones more pronounced.

"We're completely below the empty slash," Dee said.

They did forty up the road, Jack constantly looking back through the glassless hatch for anything in pursuit.

After four miles, the pavement went to gravel.

They came out of the canyon.

The road had been cut into a mountainside and the pines exchanged for hardier, more alpine-looking evergreens and aspen in full color. At 2:48 p.m., the engine sputtered, and at 2:49, on a level stretch of road on the side of a mountain, died.

They rolled to a stop and Jack looked over at Dee and back at his children.

"That's all, folks."

"We're out of gas?" Cole asked.

"Bone dry."

Dee set the parking brake.

Jack opened his door, stepped down onto the

road. "Come on."

"Jack." Dee climbed out and slammed her door. "What are you doing?"

He adjusted the sling which Dee had fashioned out of a spare tee-shirt for his left arm, said, "I'm going to walk up this road until I find something to help us or until I can't walk anymore. You coming?"

"There's not going to be anything up this road, Jack. We're in the middle of a fucking wilderness."

"Should we just lay down in the road right here then? Wait to die? Or maybe I should get the Glock and put us all—"

"Don't you ever—"

"Hey, guys?" Naomi got out and walked around to the front of the Rover and stood between her parents. "Look."

She pointed toward the side of the mountain, perhaps fifty feet up from where they'd stopped, at an overgrown, one-lane road that climbed into the trees.

Jack said, "It's probably just some old wagon trail. There used to be mining around here I think."

"You don't see it."

"See what?"

"There's a mailbox."

The mailbox was black and unmarked, and the

Colcloughs walked past it up the narrow road into the trees. Jack was winded before the first hairpin turn, but keeping far enough ahead of Dee and the kids that he could gasp for air in private.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, he stopped at an overlook—dizzy, heartbeat rattling his entire body, pounding through his left shoulder. He collapsed breathless on the rock, still sucking down gulps of air when the rest of his family arrived.

“This is too much for you,” Dee said, out of breath herself.

They could see a slice of the road several hundred feet below where it briefly emerged from the forest. A square-topped dome of a mountain loomed ten miles away, the summit dusted with snow. Even bigger peaks beyond.

Jack struggled to his feet and went on.

The road wound through an aspen grove that was peaking—pale yellows and deep yellows and the occasional orange—and when the wind blew through the trees, the leaves fluttered like weightless coins.

The sun was falling through the western sky. Already a cool edge to the air in advance of another clear and freezing night. They hadn't brought their sleeping bags from the car. Hadn't brought water.

Nothing but the shotgun and the Glock and it occurred to Jack that they might very well be sleeping under the stars on the side of this mountain tonight.

Several switchbacks later, the road curved and Jack walked out of the aspen into a meadow.

He stopped.

Took the Glock out of his waistband and tugged back the slide.

Dee gasped.

Cole said, "What, Mama?"

Jack turned around and shushed them and led them back into the woods.

"Is anyone there?" Dee whispered.

"I couldn't tell. Let me go check things out."

"I should go, Jack. You're too weak."

"Don't move from this spot, any of you, until I come back."

He jogged into the meadow. You could see the desert in the west, the sun bleeding out across it and the distant gray thread of Highway 191. It was getting cold. He slowed to a walk, his shoulder pulsing again. The wind had died away and the trees stood motionless. Somewhere, the murmur of a stream.

A covered porch ran the length of it, loaded with

firewood. Solar panels clung to the steep pitch of the roof. Dormers on the second floor. A chimney rising up through the center. The windows were dark, reflecting the sunset off the glass so he couldn't see inside, even as he walked up the steps.

The wooden porch bowed and creaked under his weight. He leaned in toward a window, touched his nose to the glass, framed his face in his hands to block the natural light.

Darkness inside. The shape of furniture. High ceilings. No movement.

He tried the front door. Locked. Turned away, shielded his eyes, and swung the Glock through the window.

Dee shouted something from the woods.

"I'm okay," he yelled. "Just breaking in."

He straddled the windowframe and stepped down into the cabin. Through the skylight above the entrance, a column of late sun slanted through the glass and struck the stone of the freestanding fireplace with a medallion of orange light. It didn't smell like anyone had been here in some time. The mustiness of infrequent habitation.

From what he could see in the fading light, the floorplan was spacious and open. A staircase corkscrewed up to the second level where the

banistered hallway and three open doors were visible from Jack's vantage.

He moved across the hardwood floor toward the kitchen.

A deep sink and granite countertops lined the back wall of windows which looked out over the deck into the brilliant aspen.

He walked over to the pantry, pulled open the door.

Jack led Dee and the kids up the front porch steps and into the cabin.

"There's food here, Jack?"

"Just come on."

The last trickle of daylight was just sufficient to illuminate the kitchen, where Jack had thrown open every cabinet so they could see the treasure he'd found.

Dee sat down and put her head between her knees and wept.

They spread out on the floor as the world went black out the kitchen windows, each with their own cold can and sharing a big bag of sourdough pretzels torn open and spilled across the floor beside a sixer of warm Sierra Mist.

"Oh my God, this is the best thing I've ever tasted,"

Naomi said, halfway through her clam chowder. Grunts of agreement all around—Jack had gone for the chili, Dee the beef vegetable soup, Cole the Chef Boyardee cheese ravioli.

A half hour later, Naomi slept on a leather couch near the fireplace while Jack covered her with two quilts he'd found in a game closet. He went up the spiral staircase, holding one of the kerosene lamps they'd taken from the coffee table downstairs, Dee in tow, carrying Cole. Into the first bedroom. Jack pulled back the quilt, blanket, sheet, and Dee laid their son on the mattress and kissed his forehead and covered him back up.

"It'll get cold in here tonight," she said.

"Not as cold as last night."

"If he wakes up and no one's here, he's going to be scared."

"You think so? After these last few days? He's done in, Dee. He won't wake for hours."

They lay in bed downstairs in the dark under a pile of blankets. Somewhere, the tick of a second hand. Naomi's deep respirations in the living room. No other sound.

"Do you think we're safe here?" Dee whispered.



“Safer than starving and freezing to death on the side of a mountain.”

“But long-term, I mean.”

“I don’t know yet. I can’t think about it right now. I have nothing left.”

Dee snuggled up to him and stretched a leg across his, her skin cool and like fine-grit sandpaper. She ran her fingers through the hair on his chest. First time in months she’d put her hands on him, and it felt, in the best kind of way, like a stranger touching him.

“Nothing, Jack?” And she slipped her hand inside the waistband of his boxer shorts. “Cause this doesn’t feel like nothing.”

“Our daughter is twenty feet away,” he whispered.

Dee climbed out of bed and crept across the floor and closed them in behind the French doors and their panes of opaque glass. He heard the lock push in. She pushed the straps off her shoulders and her undershirt puddled around her feet. Slid her panties down her legs, and Jack watched her come back to him, naked and pale, wishing for some moonlight for her to move through as she crawled across the bed.

“I’m nasty,” he said. “Haven’t had a shower in—”

“I’m nasty, too.”

She stripped him and sat him up against the headboard and eased down onto his lap, and already

the pain in his shoulder was subsiding. He could tell this was going to be one of the great fucks of his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

IN the morning, Jack hiked down to the road with a gallon of the gasoline he'd found in the shed. There was plenty more where it came from—six five-gallon containers that he figured were meant for the backup generator in case the solar power system failed. The Rover managed to crank, and he put it into four-wheel high.

A hundred yards up the mountain, he stopped and grabbed the chainsaw out of the backseat and came out of his sling. Took him thirty minutes just to hack through the dense lower branches so he could get at the base, going slow so he didn't rip the stitches in his shoulder. Another twenty to carve a wedge into the trunk, and when the spruce finally fell across the road, it perfumed the air with sap and splintered wood.

Naomi and Cole were still sleeping when Jack returned to find Dee in the kitchen, having already done what he suggested—pull down all the food from the cabinets and the pantry to see what they had to work with.

“Doesn’t look like much,” he said by way of greeting.

Dee looked up from where she sat on the kitchen floor, surrounded by cans and glass jars and packages. “How’d the car do?”

“Rough as hell, but I got it to the shed. Maybe I’ll play mechanic in a few days, see if I can fix what’s wrong.”

They spent the morning dividing out the food and trying to see what they might make from the staples like flour and sugar, assuming Jack could fire up the solar power system and get the stove working. In the end, rationing as frugally as they could stomach, they calculated enough meals to feed their family for thirteen days.

“That’s not good enough,” Dee said. “And we’re going to be hungry all the time before we actually begin to starve to death.”

“It’s more food than we had yesterday. I saw some fly-fishing gear in the shed, and there’s a stream out back.”

“You took one class, Jack. Two years ago. None of your flies at home ever touched water, and you think you’re going to go out there and catch enough fish for us—”

“How about sending some positive energy into this

situation, dear-heart?"

She flashed a fake smile, batted her eyes. "I'm sure you'll catch more than we can eat, Jack. I know you can do it."

"You're such a bitch." He said it with love.

He assembled a six-weight fly rod in the shed, stocked his vest with an assortment of flies, and carried a small cooler into the woods toward the sound of moving water. Found it fifty yards in—a wide, slow stream that flowed through the aspen. He sat down on the grassy bank. The sun as high as it would be all day. Light coming down through the trees in clear, bright splashes. The sky cloudless. Almost purple.

He filled the cooler in the stream. Got the tippet tied on and chose a fly at random. Took him five attempts to cinch the knot, then walked downslope until he came to a shaded pool several feet deep and out of the ruckus of the main current.

His first cast overshot the stream and the fly snagged on a spruce sapling. He waded across, the water knee-deep and freezing, and clambered out onto the warm grass on the opposite bank.

An hour later, he felt his first tap.

Midafternoon, he hooked a fingerling, Jack tugging

the green line and backing away from the stream. It flopped in the grass, and he carefully lifted the fish which torqued violently and then went still, gills pulsing in his hand. Silver. Spotted with brown dots. He unhooked the fly and walked back to the cooler and dipped the trout into the water, thinking, God, was it small. Two or three bites at most if he didn't completely destroy the thing when he tried to clean it.

They dined at the kitchen table as the light ran out—two cans of cold navy beans split between the four of them, three pretzels apiece, water from one of the plastic jugs Dee had brought in from the Rover.

“How many fish did you catch?” Cole asked.

“One,” Jack said.

“How big?”

Jack held his pointer fingers five inches apart.

“Oh.”

“It's still in the cooler by the stream. But I saw some big ones.”

“Can I come fishing with you tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

Middle of the night, Jack sat up in bed.

“What's wrong?” Dee asked, still half-asleep.

“I should've cut down the mailbox.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The mailbox by the road. The one Naomi saw that led us here.”

“Do it first thing in the morning.”

“No, I’m going now. I won’t be able to sleep.”

He hiked down with the chainsaw in the dark, reached the road at four in the morning. Cold. Below freezing he would’ve guessed. That distant, square-topped mountain shining silver under the moon. He walked out into the road and stood listening for a while.

The chainsaw motor seemed inappropriate at this hour. Like screams in a church. He decapitated the mailbox and carried it across the road and threw it down the mountainside.

Walking back up to the cabin, he rounded a hairpin curve and froze. Heart accelerating at what loomed just twenty feet up the road. It raised its enormous head, the giant rack pale and sharp in the predawn. He’d almost brought the shotgun, decided against it fearing his left arm couldn’t bear the weight. And so he watched the seven-hundred-pound elk walk off the road and vanish into the trees, wondering how long it might have fed his family.

BY midmorning, he had the off-grid power system up and running, water pumping in through the tap from the underground cisterns, and the water heater beginning to warm. They filled five plastic grocery bags under the faucet and tied them off and stowed them in the chest freezer. Tried not to acknowledge the fact that they were all skipping lunch.

Jack left Dee and Naomi to scour *The Joy of Cooking* for efficient bread recipes that jived with their ingredient list, and took his son with him into the woods.

He'd anticipated Cole wanting to fish, and since there wasn't any spinning tackle to be had in the shed, surprised the boy with a provisional pole he'd fashioned that morning—an aspen sapling skinned of bark and fitted with an eight-foot length of nylon string and a ceiling screw hook with which Cole might only inflict minimal damage.

The knot tying went faster and the casting smoother, Jack sticking the fly in the vicinity of his intent almost every time.

He'd caught two fingerlings by three o'clock and his first grown-up fish by four—a twelve-inch Rainbow on

a dry fly that had been loitering in a pool beside a cascade. Cole screamed with delight as Jack brought the fish ashore, both of them squatting in that pure fall light to inspect the reddish band and the black spots and the micaceous skin that faded into white at the edges.

“It’s really something, isn’t it?” Jack said.

“You did good, Dad.”

Jack set his rod in the grass and worked the hook out and carried the trout back across the stream toward the cooler in two hands and with as much care as he’d handled Naomi and Cole as squirming newborns.

They fished until the light went bad, Jack torn between the stream and his son who’d abandoned the aspen rod to construct a pile of polished, streambed stones on the opposite shore. Jack trying to ignore that thing that had been gnawing at him now for two days, that he wouldn’t ever be ready to look in the eye. How could a father? But he saw it—from a distance, an oblique glance—and for right now at least, that was as close as his heart could stand to be.

When they returned, the sun had just slipped below the desert and Dee and Naomi were hanging blankets over the windows and the cabin smelled of



sweet, baking bread.

The women had carried in several armloads of firewood from the porch and stacked it around the hearth, and while Cole regaled everyone with the story of catching the fish, Jack built a base of kindling using a dozen of the pinecones stored in a wicker basket and an issue of *USA Today*.

The front-page headlines stopped him as he ripped out a sheet—six-month-old bits of news about the war, political infighting, Wall Street, the death of a young celebrity.

“What’s with the blankets over the windows?” he asked as he balled up the sports page and hoisted the first log onto the pyre.

“So our fire won’t be visible.”

Two more logs and then he struck a match, held it to the newsprint.

Jack lay in bed watching fire shadows move across the walls of the living room. Warm under the blanket. Hungry but content.

“We can’t have fires like this anymore,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“When we don’t need them. The winter here is going to be awful. We should save the firewood for blizzards. Nights when it goes below zero. I’m going

to have to cut a hell of a lot more wood.”

“So you want to stay?”

“If we can get the food situation under control.”

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“What? You’d rather go back out into what we just escaped?”

“No, but we’ll starve to death here.”

“Not with a seasoned outdoorsman like me taking care of things.”

A tremor of laughter moved through her.

“You noticed any changes in Cole?” he asked.

“No. Why? What makes you ask that?”

“That man in the desert—the one you shot when he came after me? He and his wife had been camping with another couple. They saw the lights. The other couple slept through them. Afterward, they murdered their friends.”

“What does this have to do with my son?”

“You, me, and Naomi, we slept through the aurora. Cole spent the night at Alex’s. Their family went out to the baseball field with the neighborhood and watched. Remember him telling us about it the next day?”

Dee was quiet for a long time.

Jack could see the embers in the fireplace and he could hear his daughter breathing.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Jack, what that man told

you. He's our son, for chrissake. You think he wants to hurt us?"

"I don't know, but this is something we should be aware of. Today, I caught him staring at himself in the mirror. For a long time. It was weird. I don't know what that was about, but—"

"We don't know that any of what's happening is connected to the lights. It's total speculation."

"I agree, but what if Cole changes? What if he becomes violent?"

"Jack, I'm just telling you, if it turns out. . .I want you to shoot me."

"Dee—"

"I'm not kidding, not exaggerating, just telling you that I do not have it in me to handle that."

"You have a daughter, too. You don't have the luxury not to handle shit."

"Should we kill our son if he becomes a threat? Is that the question you're dancing around?"

"We have to talk about it, Dee. I don't want it to happen and us have no idea what to do."

"I think I already answered your question."

"What?"

"I would rather die."

"Me, too," Jack said.

"So what are we saying?"

“We’re saying. . .we’re saying he’s our boy, and we stay together, no matter what.”

\* \* \* \* \*

AT dawn, Jack crept out of bed and dressed in the dark, grabbed the shotgun leaning against the bedside table and took it with him out into the living room.

He unlocked the front door and stepped outside.

Freezing. A heavy frost on the grass.

The desert purple. Still black along the western fringe.

He walked across the meadow into the trees and sat down against the base of an aspen. Everything still. Everything he loved in that dark house across the way.

His breath steamed and he thought about his father and he thought about Reid, his best friend in the humanities department, and the pints they’d put down Thursday nights at Two Fools Tavern. The remembrance touched something so raw he disavowed it all, on the spot. Focused instead on the coming hours, and all the things he had to do, and the order in which he might do them. Nothing before this cabin mattered anymore, only the given day, and with

this thought he cleared his mind and scanned the trees that rimmed the meadow, praying for an elk to emerge.

He took the chainsaw and felled aspen trees until lunch. His stitches held, so he fished the rest of the day, taking three cutthroats and a brook trout out of a section of the stream a quarter mile upslope that boasted an abundance of deep pools. The water clear where it passed over rock and green where the sun hit it. Black in the shadows.

In the late afternoon, Jack stood across the stream from Cole watching the boy float aspen leaves into a cascade. He reeled in and set his rod down and waded across. Climbed up onto the bank and sat down dripping in the leaves beside his son.

“How you doing, buddy?”

“Good.”

Cole pushed another leaf into the water and they watched the current take it.

“You like being here?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“I do, too.”

“These are my little boats, and they’re crashing in the waterfall.”

“Can I sail one?”

Cole offered a leaf, and Jack sent another golden ship to its death.

“Cole, remember the aurora you watched with Alex?”

“Yes.”

“I want to ask you something about it.”

“What?”

“Did you feel different after you saw it?”

“A little bit.”

“Like how?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you have strange thoughts toward your mom and your sister and me?”

The boy shrugged.

“You could tell me, you know. I want you to know that. You can always tell me anything. No matter what it is. No matter how bad you think it is.”

“I just wish you had seen the lights, too,” Cole said.

“Why is that?”

“They were real pretty. More than anything I ever saw.”

They drained the cooler as the sun dropped and carried it back to the cabin, fish flopping inside against the plastic.

Jack and Dee sat in rocking chairs on the front

porch drinking ice cold bottles of Miller High Life from a case that had been left behind. They were watching great spirals of smoke swirl up into the sky sixty miles northwest near the base of Grand Teton.

“What’s burning out there?” Dee said.

“I think that’s Jackson.”

They ate dinner and put the kids to bed. When they came back out onto the porch, the sun had finally crashed, leaving the flames of that distant, burning city to stand out in the darkness like an abandoned campfire.

Jack cracked open a new pair of beers, handed one to Dee.

Tired and strangely satisfied with the soreness in his body.

He’d been rehearsing how he would say it all day, the last two days even. Figured he might as well get on with it, though the phrasing had completely escaped him.

“Does it feel to you,” Jack said, “like we’re starting a new life?”

“Little bit. How many days have we been here?”

He had to think about it. “Three.”

“Feels longer. A lot longer.”

“Yeah.”

He could feel the good beer buzz beginning to

swarm in his head. Didn't know if it was the altitude or malnourishment, but he couldn't think of the last time two beers had gotten him this close to drunk.

"I need to tell you something," he said.

"What?" she laughed, "*you're* seeing someone?"

None of the permutations of this conversation, as he'd imagined it, had involved Dee asking that question. His head cleared so fast it left him with a subtle throbbing at the base of his skull—a premonition of the hangover to come.

"Two years ago."

Dee's face emptied of the lightness of the moment and her bottle hit the porch and the beer fizzed out and drained through a crack between the two-by-sixes. The air suddenly reeked of yeast and alcohol.

"Lasted a month," he said. "Only time I ever. . . ended it because I couldn't stand—"

"One of your fucking TAs?"

"We met in—"

"No, no, no, I don't want to hear a single detail of any of it and I don't ever want to know her name. Nothing about her. Just why you're telling me this now. In this moment. I could've died never knowing and you took that from me."

"When we left Albuquerque, our marriage was on life support. I mean, three nights ago was the first time



we'd been together in. . .I don't even know—”

“Seven months.”

“Dee, I know I've been checked out on our family, and for a long time. Because of guilt, depression, I don't know. These last nine days have been the worst, hardest of our life, but in some ways, the best, too. And now, it feels to me like we're starting something new here, so I don't want to start it with any lies. Nothing between us.”

“Well, there is now. And. . . . .why the *fuck* would you tell me this?”

She shrieked it, her voice bouncing back from the invisible wall of trees.

“At least I was always honest with you about Kiernan,” Dee said.

“Yeah, that was such a comfort as our marriage imploded.”

Dee jumped up from the rocking chair and walked off the porch and vanished into the meadow.

Jack slammed the rest of his beer, threw it in the grass.

Sat watching the horizon burn to the soundtrack of his wife crying out there in the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

5:15 a.m. and Jack rose up slowly, shouldered the shotgun. He took aim on the neck of the same giant bull he'd seen two mornings ago on the hike up from the road. The recoil drove a splinter of pain through his left shoulder, a thundering blast across the clearing.

The elk's head dipped. It staggered.

Jack on his feet, bolting through the frosted grass as he pumped the Mossberg and fired again.

When he reached it, the animal lay on its side, eyes open, breathing fast and raggedly. Jack knelt beside it and held one of the spurs on the enormous rack while the blood rushed out across the ground.

He hadn't field-dressed an animal in over twenty years, since the last time he'd hunted with his father in Montana when he was in college. But the anatomy and the method slowly returned to him.

Naomi and Cole looked on in semi-horror as he tied off the hoofs, heaved the animal onto its back, and with the bowie knife he'd been given in Silverton, Colorado, slit the elk from anus to throat.

He worked hard, tried to work fast. As the first rays of sunlight streamed through the aspen onto the meadow, he severed the muscle tissue that held the entrails and let the steaming gutpile roll out of the

carcass into the grass. He excavated the colon and the bladder, liver and heart, and sent Cole back to the cabin in search of several blankets.

He was three hours skinning the elk, two more separating the shoulder from the ribcage. All afternoon removing the backstrap, boning out the meat from between the ribs, peeling off the tenderloins from underneath. Everything laid out to drain and cool on a large blanket. He cut the hindquarters from the pelvic bone as the sun slid down over the desert, trying not to slice the meat itself but still doing a fair amount of damage.

Naomi brought him a can of tomato soup for supper, which he drank down in less than a minute. When he asked about her mother, she told him Dee was sleeping. Had been all day.

In the cold still dusk, thirteen hours after the kill, Jack carried, in five trips, what he estimated to be two hundred pounds of meat to the front porch of the cabin.

The bags of water had frozen solid in the chest freezer, and Jack stowed the meat inside, still wrapped in blankets. He was sunburned and weak and covered in blood, the elk's and his—several stitches had ripped and the wound in his shoulder had

opened again.

He took his first shower since arriving at the cabin. Twenty minutes under near-scalding water scrubbing the blood out of his hair and skin and watching the filth swirl down the drain under his feet. Crawled into a double bed on an aspen frame a little before 10:00 p.m. in the second bedroom upstairs. Cole snoring softly next door. Through the window he could hear the sound of the stream in the woods.

A footstep snapped him awake. He opened his eyes to the silhouette of Dee standing in the doorway. She came over and climbed into bed, their faces inches apart in the dark.

“I hear we have an elk,” she whispered.

“In the freezer. As we speak.”

“You’re your kids’ superhero, I hope you know. I’ve never heard Naomi talk about you like she did today.”

“I’m going to miss being a constant source of embarrassment.”

She put her hand on his face. “You don’t stink,” she said.

“Showers will do that.”

“Why are you up here and not in my bed?”

“Figured you still needed some space.”

She kissed him. “Come with me, Jack.”

SNOW, just a dusting, lay upon the meadow the following morning but it was gone before lunch. Dee replaced the stitches in Jack's shoulder and he spent an hour butchering steaks out of the tenderloins. Made a dry rub from the available spices in the kitchen and worked it into the meat.

He found a wiffle ball set in the shed. They used empty milkjugs for bases and weeded a pitcher's mound and held a series, boys versus girls, that concluded in game seven when Cole knocked a line drive over third base and brought Jack home.

The afternoon, Jack spent sitting on the porch drinking beer and watching Dee and the kids play out on the meadow. He wouldn't allow himself to think back or forward, but only to register the moment—the wind moving through gold aspen leaves, his skin warm in the sun, the sound of Cole's laughter, the shape of Dee when, every so often, she would turn and look back toward the porch and wave to him. Her shoulders were brown and the details of her face obscured by distance and the shadow of a visor, though he could still pick out the white brushstroke of her smile.

As another day set sail, he grilled the elk steaks and a rainbow and surprised everyone with a bottle of 1994 Silver Oak he'd found hidden away in a cabinet over the sink. They gathered at the kitchen table and ate by candlelight, even Cole getting his own small pour of wine in a shotglass. Toward the end of supper, Jack stood and raised his glass and toasted his son, his daughter, his wife, each individually, and then said to everyone, his voice only breaking once, that of all his days, this had been the finest of his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

ANOTHER fall day in the mountains, Jack fishing alone with his thoughts and the sound of moving water that never seemed to leave him now, even in dreams. Imagining what winter might be like in this place. An entire season spent indoors.

He caught two brookies before lunch and stowed them away in the cooler. The exhaustion from two days ago still lingered. He found a bed of moss downstream and took off his disintegrating trail shoes and eased back onto the natural carpet. There weren't as many leaves on the aspen as there had been just a week ago when they'd arrived, the woods brighter for it. He could feel the moisture from the

moss seeping through his shirt—cool and pleasant—and the sunlight in his face a perfect offset. He slept.

Walked home in the early evening, the inside of the cooler noisy with the throes of four suffocating fish.

Called out, “I’m home,” as he climbed onto the porch.

Set the cooler down, kicked off his shoes.

Inside, Dee and the kids played Monopoly on the living room floor.

“Who’s winning?” he asked.

“Cole,” Dee said. “Na and I are broke. He’s bought every property he’s landed on. Owns Community Chest and Chance. I just sold him Free Parking.”

“Can you even do that?”

“I think he’s paying us not to quit at this point. It’s all very ridiculous.”

He bent down, kissed his wife.

“You smell fishy,” she said. “How’d you do?”

“Four.”

“Big ones?”

“Decent size.”

“We can eat whenever you’re ready.”

Jack showered and dressed in a plaid button-up and blue jeans that were perhaps a size too small and

still smelled strongly of their prior owner. Tinged with the remnant of sweet smoke, cigar or pipe. Something crinkled in the back pocket as Jack walked from the bedroom to the kitchen, and he dug out a receipt for a box of tippet from the Great Outdoor Shop in Pinedale, purchased four months ago with a credit card by Douglas W. Holt.

A three-course meal: freshly-baked bread, one can of broccoli cheddar soup, a rainbow trout, seasoned and grilled. They had learned to eat slowly, to stretch out each course with conversation or some other diversion. That afternoon, Dee had perused a shelf of old paperbacks in the game closet, picked a David Morrell thriller, and now she read to them the first chapter during the soup course.

After supper, she boiled a pot of chamomile tea.

"That soup was excellent," Jack said as she carried four steaming mugs over to the table, two in each hand. "You really outdid yourself."

"Old family recipe, you know. The Campbells."

"Who's that?" Cole asked.

"Mom's kidding around."

"But seriously, Jack, the fish was incredible."

He sipped his tea. Could've been stronger, but it felt so good just to hold the warm mug in his hands



which were still raw from long hours of casting.

“Busy boy today, huh?” Dee said. “Four fish and how much wood did you cut?”

“I didn’t cut any wood.”

“Of course you did.”

He flashed a perplexed smile. “Um, I didn’t.”

“Are you joking?”

“About what?”

“Cutting firewood.”

“No, why?”

“I heard a chainsaw.”

Jack set his mug on the table and stared at Dee.

“When?” he asked.

“Late this afternoon.”

“Where was the sound of the chainsaw coming from?”

“The driveway. I thought you were taking down more trees.”

Cole said, “What’s wrong?”

“Jack, you’re playing around, and all things considered, what we’ve been through, this isn’t funny at—”

“I fished all day. Naomi, did you take the chainsaw out?” But he knew the answer before she spoke, because the mug was rattling against the table in her trembling hands.

Dee started to rise.

“No, don’t get up.”

“We have to—”

“Just listen.” Jack lowered his voice. “If people have found the cabin, then they’re probably watching us right now through that window at your back, waiting until we go to bed.”

“Waiting for what?” Naomi asked.

“Everyone drink your tea and act like we’re wrapping up a nice family evening.”

His mouth had run dry. He sipped his tea and let his eyes move briefly past Dee’s shoulder to the window behind the kitchen table, the only one in the house they hadn’t shielded with a blanket since it backed right up against the woods. Nothing to see at this hour, the sun long since set. Wondered if someone crouched out there in the dark at this moment, watching his family.

“You’re sure you heard it?” he said quietly. “The chainsaw?”

“Yes.”

“I heard it, too.” Tears rolling down Naomi’s face. “I thought it was you, Dad.”

Before supper, Jack had switched off the solar power system to recharge overnight and they’d eaten by firelight. Several candles lit the living room, too.

One in each of the upstairs bedrooms.

“The shotgun and the Glock are under our bed,” Jack said. “I think we have a box of ammo for the Glock that’s mostly full, but we’re down to the last half-dozen twelve gauge shells.” He looked at Naomi, then Dee, then Cole. Hated the fear he saw. “We’re going to act like it’s just another normal night. I’ll put Cole to bed. Naomi, you head up to your room. Dee, clear the table and get all the cans of food and whatever bread’s left into a plastic bag, some silverware, too, and a can opener. We don’t know how close they are to the cabin, if they can see inside, see us in the other rooms, so don’t hurry, but don’t take too much time either.”

“What about all our meat?”

“Leave it. I’ll come back downstairs and then Dee and I will blow out the living room and kitchen and bedroom candles. We’ll dress in the dark, all of us, all the clothes we can wear, and then we’ll meet in the other downstairs bedroom—the one near the shed. Naomi, you stay upstairs with your brother after I’ve left and listen for me to call you down. Got it?”

She was crying. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Me either, but can you do this, what I’m asking?”

She nodded.

“Look, maybe there’s nobody out there, but we

have to make sure, and we aren't safe in here until we know."

"Are we going to take the car?" Dee asked.

"No, because they probably have one blocking us in. I'm sure they were using the chainsaw to cut that tree I brought down across the driveway. So they could drive up. We just need to get into the woods and hide until I can figure out what's going on."

Jack carried his son through the kitchen, up the spiral staircase, and into the bedroom. Threw back the covers and laid Cole on the mattress.

"Naomi's right next door," Jack said. "You listen to your sister, okay?"

"Don't blow out the candle."

"I have to, buddy."

"I don't like it dark."

"Cole, I need you to be brave." He kissed the boy's forehead. "I'll see you real soon."

Jack extinguished the candle on the dresser and tried not to rush down the steps. The kitchen was already dark, the plastic bag of food tied off and sitting on the hearth. He blew out the candles on the coffee table and moved blindly toward his and Dee's bedroom, eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness.

Dee stood by the blanketed window.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“Just peeking out at the meadow. Haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Let’s get going.”

Jack donned two more pipe-scented shirts, his fingers struggling with the buttons in the dark, heart slamming in his chest. When he’d dressed, he slid two shells into the Mossberg to replace the two he’d used on the elk. He crammed the four remaining into the side pocket of his jeans, grabbed the Mag-Lite from the bedside table drawer, and handed Dee the Glock.

In the living room, Jack called up to his children. Laced his trail shoes while Naomi and Cole descended the stairs, and they all went together past the fireplace into the second bedroom.

Jack crawled across the bed and tugged down the blanket Dee had tacked over the glass and unlatched the hasp.

The window slid up. The night cold rushed in.

Jack climbed over the sill, stepped down into the grass.

“All right, Cole, come on.”

He grabbed his son under his arms and hoisted him out of the cabin. “Stay right beside me, and don’t say a word.”

He helped Naomi through and then Dee. Lowered the window back and pulled his wife in close so he could whisper in her ear.

“We can’t leave without our packs. They’re in the back of the Rover, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait for me to call you over.”

Jack crept across the grass and peered around the corner of the cabin.

The meadow stretched into darkness.

No wind. No moon. No movement.

He sprinted twenty yards to the shed and crouched down behind it, straining to listen and hearing nothing but the internal combustion of his heart.

Jack blew a sharp, stifled whistle, then watched as Dee and the kids emerged from the shadows behind the cabin, running toward him, their pants swishing in the grass for eight agonizing seconds before they reached him.

“Did I do good?” Cole asked.

“You did great. Dee, I’m going around to the front of the shed to get our packs. If something goes wrong, you hear gunshots, me yelling, whatever, take the kids into the woods, all the way back to the stream. I’ll be able to find you there.”

He rose to his feet, moved along the backside of

the shed, the shotgun in one hand, flashlight in the other. Rounded the corner, the driveway looming just ahead. He jogged the edge of the woods until he came to it. The single lane descended out of meager starlight into the darkness of the aspen grove, and he followed it down until he came around the first hairpin turn. A Suburban blocked the way, its color indeterminate in the lowlight. A Datsun pickup truck behind it. He put a light through the glass and checked the ignitions of both vehicles. No keys. No idea how to hotwire a car.

He ran back up the driveway. After several minutes in the woods, the clearing appeared almost bright. Stood there for a moment scanning the meadow and the trees around the periphery, but the shadows kept their secrets so well he couldn't even see his family in the darkness behind the shed.

Twenty strides brought him to the side of it.

He swung around the corner and got his hand on the doorknob and the hinges ground together with a rusty shriek as he slipped inside.

A wave of disorientation accompanied the absolute, unflinching darkness.

Jack knelt down, laid the shotgun in the dirt, and fumbled with the head of the Mag-Lite, trying to turn it on.

Several feet away, a shuffle in the dirt.

Jack froze, bracing against a shot of liquid fear that made his scalp tingle and his throat constrict, thinking it could be a rodent or some tool that had shifted. Or someone pointing a gun at him. Or his frazzled imagination.

Two choices. See it or shoot it.

He lowered the flashlight back onto the dirt floor. As he felt around for the shotgun, a motor coughed ten feet away, like someone had pulled a start rope. Then it sputtered again and the shed filled with the reek of gas and the banshee-wail of a two-stroke. A small LED light cut on—affixed to the handle with black electrical tape—and it sent out a schizophrenic beam that hit the Rover, the shed walls, and the large, bearded man who came at Jack with the screaming chainsaw, gripped like a bat, spring-loaded to swing.

Jack grabbed the shotgun and jacked a shell as the man reached him, no time to stand or brace.

The blast knocked Jack onto his back in the dirt, and at point-blank range, cut the ski-jacketed man in half at the waist.

Jack clambered back onto his feet, pumped the shotgun again, lifted the Mag-Lite, and screwed the bulb to life.

The man still clutched the idling chainsaw, but only



in one hand, having nearly severed his right leg at the knee.

Jack leaned down and flipped the kill switch.

In the renewed silence, the man emitted desperate drowning noises. Over them, Jack could hear Dee calling his name through the back wall of the shed. He went to it and put his mouth to the wood and said, "I'm okay. Go where we talked about right now. There's more of them."

He hurried over to the Rover and lifted his pack out of the cargo area, trying to recall what all it held, if it might be worth rifling through Dee's pack or bringing it too, but there wasn't time.

He shouldered his pack and clipped the hip belt and chest strap and went back over to the man in the ski jacket who'd turned sheet white and already bled a black lake across the dirt.

"How many of you are there?" Jack asked. But the man just stared up at him with a kind of glassy-eyed amazement and would not, or could not, speak.

Jack killed the Mag-Lite and eased open the door to the shed and peered out.

Already, they were halfway across the meadow—four shadows running toward him and two smaller, faster ones out ahead of the others.

He leveled the shotgun, squeezed off three blinding

reports.

Four points of light answered, flashing in the dark like high-octane lightning bugs, and bullets struck the wood beside him and punched through the door above his head.

He stepped out and around the side and sprinted to the back of the shed.

His family was gone.

Lightning footsteps approached, the jingle of a chain, snarling. He turned back to see the pit bull tear around the corner, skidding sidelong across the grass trying to right its forward motion.

Jack raised the shotgun, the animal accelerating toward him, and fired as it leapt for his throat, the buckshot instantly arresting its momentum. He pumped the slide and took aim on the second pit bull which ripped around the corner with greater efficiency. He dropped it whimpering and tumbling through the grass.

Jack ran ten feet into the woods and slid out of his pack. He prostrated himself behind a log. Couldn't hear a thing over his own panting and he closed his eyes and buried his face in the leaves until the pounding in his chest decelerated.

When he looked up again, four figures stood behind the shed where his family had hid just

moments ago. Three others joined them.

Someone said, "Where's Frank?"

"In the field. He caught some pellets in his neck."

A woman walked over, the helve of an ax resting on her shoulder.

She said, "I saw someone run into the woods a minute ago."

A beam of light struck the ground. "Let's head in. Only four. And two of them children."

Another light.

Another.

Someone shot their beam through the woods. Jack ducked behind the log, the light slanting past him, firing the fringes of the bark. They were still talking, but he'd lost their voices with his face jammed up under the log and straining to fish the twelve gauge shells out of his pocket. Jack was on the brink of shifting to another position but the footfalls stopped him.

They approached him now—must have been all eight of them—filling the woods with the dry rasp of crushing leaves. Someone stepped over the log and the heel of a boot came down inches from Jack's left arm. He caught the scent of rancid body odor. He watched them move by, eight distinct fields of light sweeping the woods. He wondered how far in his family had made it, if Dee had any concept of what

was coming her way.

After a while, he rolled out from under the log and sat up. Glanced back toward the shed. Into the woods again. He could hear the footfalls growing softer, indistinguishable and collective like steady rain, glimpsed the bulbs of distant light and occasionally a full beam where it swung through mist.

Jack dug into his pocket for the shells, fed in the last four.

Six rounds. Eight people.

He stood up and got his pack on.

Jacked a shell, started toward the lights.

After forty yards, the stream-murmur filtered in, and soon there was nothing but the sound of it and the cool, sweet smell of the water.

He eased down onto the bank. The lights had moved on. Blackness everywhere. Thinking he'd told Dee to get to the stream, but she may have seen the group of flashlights coming, been forced to go elsewhere. The urge to call out for her overwhelmed him.

He got up, started hiking again.

Sometimes the starlight would find a way down through the trees and he would catch a glimpse of the stream like black glass, warped and fissured, but mainly it was impossible to see anything. He didn't

dare use the Mag-Lite.

Fifteen minutes of blind groping brought him a quarter mile uphill.

He collapsed in a patch of cold, damp sand and stared back the way he'd come. He tried to catch his breath, but the longer he sat there the panic festered inside of him. Finally he rose to his feet, running uphill now, running until his heart felt like it was going to swell out of his chest. He went on like this for he didn't know how long, and every time he stopped it was still just him alone in the woods and the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE violence of his own shivering woke him.

Jack lifted his head out of the leaves. Dawn. A moment before. Frail blue light upon everything in the brutal cold. He had dreamed but they were too sweet and vivid to linger on.

Worked his way up the mountain for thirty minutes before stopping streamside by a boulder covered in frosted moss. He looked around. Wiped his eyes. Considered all the ways they could have fucked this up—he might have gone upstream when he should've hiked down, or Dee and the kids had pushed hard all

night and gotten too far ahead of him, or he'd unknowingly passed them in the dark, or maybe they hadn't even stayed with the stream and become lost elsewhere on this endless mountain.

Another two hundred yards and he came around a large boulder, saw three people lying huddled together in the leaves on the opposite bank.

He stopped. Looked down at his shoes. Looked up again. Still there, and he didn't quite believe it, even as he rock-hopped to the other side of the stream.

Dee stirred at the sound of his footsteps, then bolted upright with the Glock trained on his chest. He smiled and his eyes burned and then he was holding her as she shook with sobs.

"Do you know how easy it would've been for you to pass us by in the dark?" she whispered.

"But that didn't happen," he said.

"I heard all those gunshots. I thought you had—"

"That didn't happen. I found you."

"I didn't know if we should wait or keep going, and then I saw all those lights in the woods, and we just—"

"You did exactly what you should have."

Naomi sat up and rubbed her eyes. She looked at her father, scowling.

"Hey," she said.

"Morning, Sunshine."

“We can’t go back,” Jack said. He was staring down at the bag of soupcans Dee had brought and the contents of his backpack, which he’d spread out in the leaves. A tent. Two sleeping bags. Water filter. Camp stove. Map. Not much else.

“But what if they leave?”

“Why would they? I saw their cars, Dee. They have no provisions, haven’t fallen in with a big group, so they’re facing the same problems we were—no gas, no water, no food. And they just stumbled across all those things at the cabin, plus shelter, plus two hundred pounds of meat in the freezer.”

“Jack, that place is perfect. We could have—”

“There’s eight of them. Eight armed adults. We’d be slaughtered.”

“Well, I don’t much feel like wandering aimlessly through the wilderness.”

“Not aimlessly, Dee.” He knelt down and opened the Wyoming roadmap. “We’re here,” he said, “northern edge of the Wind Rivers. We’re actually not that far from the east side of the mountains.” He traced a black line north. “Let’s shoot for this highway.”

“How far is it?”

“Fifteen, twenty miles tops.”

“Jesus. And then what, Jack?” He could hear the emotion rising in her voice. “We reach this road in the middle of nowhere, and then what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Well, I know. We’ll need a big fucking miracle. Because that’s how we’re going to stay alive from here on out, Jack. Big fucking miracles. That’s how bad a shape we’re in, and you want us to hike across these—” Her voice broke and she turned away and walked off into the woods.

“Mom.” Naomi started after her, but Jack caught his daughter’s arm.

“Let her go, baby. Just give her a minute.”

They were all day hiking the mountainside. The aspen giving way to evergreens the higher they climbed. The stream shrinking toward headwaters, bubbling softer and softer, until at last it disappeared into a rocky hole in the mountain, never to be heard from again.

Stopped while there was still plenty of light at a small lake at nine thousand feet. It backed up against a two hundred-foot cliff which had calved a rock glacier into the water—giant boulders half-submerged on the far side.



Jack raised the tent and collected fir cones and browned needles and more wood than they could burn in three nights.

He walked to the edge of the lake as the sun fell. The water looked black. So still as to suggest ice or obsidian, except for the slow concentric circles that eddied out when a trout surfaced. He kept reminding himself what a beautiful place this was, that they could be suffering on the East Coast, or in Albuquerque, or be dead like so many others. But somehow the bright side of things had burned out tonight, and the light draining out of the sky and the lake's reflection of it just felt tragic.

He glanced back at his family—sitting outside the tent, waiting for him to get the fire going. Got up and started toward them. A day's worth of walking in his swollen knees and lots more of that to come.

His children looked up at his approach.

He forced himself to smile.

In the middle of the night, Cole said, "What's that sound?"

Jack lay beside him on the sleeping bag. It had woken him, too, and he whispered, "Just that rockfall across the lake."

"Is someone throwing rocks?"

“No, they’re shifting.”

“What are those splashes?”

“Fish jumping out of the water.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You want me to go out there and tell them to cut it out?”

“Yes.”

“It’s okay. I promise. Go back to sleep.”

“No one’s coming after us?”

“We’re safe up here, Cole.”

“I’m hungry.”

“We’ll eat something in the morning.”

“First thing?”

“First thing.”

The boy fell back asleep almost instantly but Jack lay awake, trying to ignore the rock jutting up through the bottom of the sleeping bag into his side. The moon was bright through the tent walls. He listened to everyone’s heavy breathing, thinking how, in his lifetime, he’d lain awake at night worrying over so much pointless shit—money, his job, a fight he’d had with Dee—and now that he had real life and death stuff to obsess about, all he wanted to do was sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

A film of ice rimmed the lake. Steam lifting off the surface in the early morning sun. Jack was on the grassy bank pumping water through the filter into a stainless steel pot. He boiled the water, added three packets of oatmeal from his emergency kit, and they sat around the smoking remnants of the campfire, passing the pot and trying to wake up.

After breakfast, they broke down the tent and packed up and headed out while there was still frost on the dying grasses.

They followed no trail.

With his compass, Jack marked a cirque of forbidding granite spires ten miles away as their definitive eastern goal.

They climbed all morning through a spruce forest, emerging at midday onto a broad, ascending ridge of meadows.

Herds of unattended cattle grazed the open range.

Mountains in every direction and the warm, adobe glow of desert to the east.

In the early afternoon, Cole began to complain that his legs hurt.

Dee took over Jack's pack, and Jack put his son on his shoulders.

They'd all drunk plenty of water with breakfast but

had since sweated it out under the high-altitude sun. Jack could feel a dehydration headache coming on. They'd all be suffering soon.

They pushed on in silence, everyone too tired, too thirsty to talk.

In the evening they came down into a valley that framed a lake. Naomi crying as she shuffled along on the sides of her blistered feet, telling everyone she was okay, that she could make it to the water.

Jack assembled the filter and pumped while his family drank straight from the plastic tube. Fifteen minutes to satisfy their thirst, and then Dee pumped for him, Jack lying in the cool grass and letting the freezing lake water run down his throat and over his sunburned face.

He felt delirious, his head undergoing a slow implosion, and it was all he could do to construct the tent. A fire was out of the question, and he didn't want to eat—no one did—but Dee opened a can for each of them and handed out three tablets of maximum strength Tylenol apiece.

"I'll just throw up," Jack said.

"No, you won't. You'll keep it down. We're all severely dehydrated and suffering from altitude sickness." She handed him a can of pork and beans.

“Get it in you, and drink some more water, and go to bed.”

His family slept but the agony in Jack’s head would not relent. He crawled outside a little after midnight and staggered to the edge of the lake. Bitter cold. Moon shadows everywhere. He lowered himself onto his hands and knees and dipped his head through a crust of ice into the water.

\* \* \* \* \*

IN the morning the pain had eased. He could hear his family up and about outside. Almost hot inside the tent with the sun beating down. He didn’t remember coming to bed. Couldn’t recall much of the preceding night in fact. His head mushy, like he was coming off a bender.

They were eating down by the lake and he joined them. The sun already higher than he would’ve liked. They’d be getting a late start.

“How we doing?” he asked.

“Aces,” Naomi said.

He sat beside his daughter and she passed him her can.

He sipped the cold corn chowder. “How are your

feet, angel?"

"They don't look too pretty anymore. Mom wrapped them up."

"We need to start sleeping with our food," Dee said. "There's ice crystals in my cream of mushroom."

"I personally like ice in my soup," Jack said.

Cole laughed.

"I wouldn't exactly call this rationing," Jack said, handing the can back to Naomi.

"We have to eat, Jack. We're expending so much energy in these mountains."

"What are we down to?"

"Eight cans."

"Jesus."

The climb up the east slope of the valley took them into the early afternoon, and then they finally broke out above the timberline onto the top of a knoll. Those granite spires loomed several miles to the east, their summits puncturing the low cloud deck. Not a tree in sight and rock everywhere. Four lakes visible from where they stood. The water blue-gray under the clouds.

They hiked east as the clouds lowered.

It grew dark early and a fine, cold mist began to fall, but they pushed on to the farthest lake at the foot of

the cirque, everyone wet and shivering as they raised the tent on one of the few patches of level grass.

Stripped out of their wet clothes. Climbed in and Jack zipped them up. They huddled under the sleeping bags and listened to rain patter on the tent and watched the light fade out.

“Can I say something?” Naomi said. “Something not very nice, but it’ll make me feel better?”

“Baby, you can say whatever you want.”

“This. Fucking. Sucks.”

They ate supper and Jack dressed in dry clothes. He dug the water filter and pot out of his pack.

“Back in a bit,” he said.

Slipped on his wet trail shoes and crawled outside.

Down to the lakeshore, crouched by the water. His breath pluming in the blue dusk. He strained to pick out the voices of his family, wanted to hear them talking, but nothing broke the awesome silence.

Across the lake, he made out the faintest impression of the cirque. No texture, no detail. Just a charcoal silhouette of a jagged ridgeline several thousand feet above. The ghost of a mountain.

He filled the pot and carried it to the tent.

“This one’s for Naomi.” he said.

Watched his daughter gulp it down in two long, ravenous sips.

He pumped a pot for Cole, then another for Dee, and went back outside one last time to drink his fill.

The cirque had vanished, the dusk deepened, and flakes of snow mixed in with the rain. He stopped halfway through filling the pot. His hands were trembling.

Get it over with. If you have to lose it, lose it here.

He buried his face in the bend of his arm and cried into it until there was nothing left.

They nestled together in the cold and the dark, Jack and Dee on the outside, the kids between them. No one had spoken in a long time and Jack finally said, "Everyone all right?"

"Yeah."

"I guess."

"Yes."

"Wow, that was so convincing."

"This the worst trouble you ever been through, Dad?"

"Yeah, Na. Far and away."

Cole said, "Are we going to die?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Because that isn't going to happen to our family. I'm not going to let it happen. Okay?"



“Okay.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Goodnight, all.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

“You know I love you all, right? Do I say it enough?”

“Yes, Dad, you do.”

For a split second, a flash of the Naomi of old—  
sassy, sarcastic, acerbic.

It elicited his sole smile of the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

A fragile inch of snow clung to the tent and glazed the rocks. Jack stared at the sky and the lake which reflected the sky—deep cobalt. He was hungry. Starving actually. But the purity of the morning light moved him with a fleeting weightlessness that broke his heart to see it go.

The cirque loomed. Simply no avoiding it. He stood there in the cold trying to see a route, but it all looked steep as hell. Like a stupid fucking thing to even consider, fact aside that he needed to get his seven-year-old son up and over it.

He woke his family, and while Naomi and Cole launched snowballs at each other, Dee pulled the stitches out of Jack's shoulder. Then they packed up, re-banded their blistered feet, drank as much water as their stomachs could hold, and struck out before the sun had cleared the ridge.

They walked around the perimeter of the lake and into a field of car-size boulders. Didn't even begin to climb until after lunchtime, which passed unacknowledged. By mid-afternoon the snow had vanished except for in the shadows and they were a thousand feet above the lake which shone like a diamond in the valley's hand.

Cole had already arrived at the threshold of his endurance with Naomi not far behind, but they kept climbing, even as they cried, the rocks getting smaller and the slope steeper and the sun plunging toward night.

They would climb in increments of fifty feet and then stop while Cole fell apart and Dee and Jack calmed him and primed him to go just a little farther. Big, bold lies that they were almost there.

At four-thirty, Jack gave his pack to Dee and lifted his son onto his shoulders. Climbed another hundred feet and when he stopped this time, the sun perched

on the western horizon and it hit him that they'd gone as far as they were going to make it today, that they'd be spending the night on the side of this mountain. He looked up, head swimming. The rock pink, summit spires glowing in the late sun.

"Let's stop," he said.

"Stop?"

"We should find a place to hunker down."

"For the night?" Naomi said.

"Yeah."

"Where's the tent going to go?"

"No tent tonight, sweetie."

Naomi eased down onto the loose rock and the sound of his daughter crying swept down into the basin.

Jack let Cole off his shoulders and crawled over to her.

"I'm sorry, Na. I'm so sorry. I know this is hard."

"I hate it."

"Me, too, but we're going to find the best spot on this mountain. Think about the view we'll have."

"I don't give a shit about the view."

"Yeah, me neither."

"I hate this fucking mountain."

"I know, sweetie, I know."

Jack collapsed in the dirt on the downslope side of the largest stable boulder he could find, his hands raw from eight hours of climbing, eyes irritated with dust. They reclined back against the mountain using their spare clothes for pillows and blanketed under the two sleeping bags. Not a cloud in the sky and everything still and Jack praying it would stay that way.

Already it was freezing. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and Jack could see seven lakes on that treeless tableland below. Each oilblack in the dusk.

Somewhere below, a band of coyotes yapped.

Jack cracked open the last four cans of food and they ate in silence watching the last bit of sun drain away.

The planets faded in and then the stars and soon the sky swarmed with pinpricks of ancient light and they slept, dug into the side of the mountain.

\* \* \* \* \*

JACK woke cold and stiff and thirsty. His family slept, Cole burrowed into his side completely under the sleeping bag, and Jack let them sleep, a temporary escape from the diamond-cut hardness of this place. The panic was certainly there. Felt it lingering in his blindspot, trying to break in. He'd

gotten them into a terrible bind, it whispered—out of food, out of water, twelve thousand feet up a mountain they had no business climbing. He'd utterly failed them, and now they were going to die.

Naomi said, "A box of Fruit Loops, and I don't mean one of those little ones."

"Family size."

"Exactly. I'd pour the whole thing into one of our glass mixing bowls and open a carton of cold whole milk. Oh my God, I can almost taste it."

"Lucky Charms," Cole said. "Except just the marshmallows and chocolate milk."

"I would kill for one of those southwest breakfast burritos from that place near campus," Dee said. "Filled with scrambled eggs and chorizo sausage and green chiles. Couple fried cinnamon rolls. Steaming cup of dark roast. Jack?"

"Bacon, short stack, two eggs over easy, biscuits smothered in sausage gravy. Everything, and I mean everything, drowned in maple syrup and hot sauce."

"No coffee?"

"Of course coffee. Goes without saying. Might even splash some bourbon in it. Start the day off right."

They got underway, climbing in shadow, the rock

still freezing. Logged another two hundred feet and then emerged from the loose talus onto solid granite, the steepest pitch they'd seen, Dee leading now and Jack climbing under his kids, all four appendages on the mountain.

He was reaching for the next handhold when Dee said, "Holy shit, Jack."

"What?"

"Have you looked down?"

He looked down. The sweep of the mountain falling away beneath them nothing short of a total mindfuck.

"That looks way worse than it is," Jack said, though he felt like he was going to be sick. He shut his eyes and leaned into the mountain, clutching it, his chest heaving against the rock. "Just keep climbing," he said. "Don't look down if it bothers you."

"It doesn't bother me," Cole said.

"Good, but you be as careful as can be," Jack said.

"Na?"

"I'm fucking freaked."

"I know it's scary, but a little less profanity, angel."

"I can't do this, Jack. There's no way."

"Dee, you want to know something?"

"What?"

"We're kicking ass. Think of all we've been through since—"

“This is the worst.”

“Worse than getting shot at? Than some of the things we’ve seen?”

“For me it is. I’ve had nightmares about this before. Being stuck on a cliff.”

“Well, we aren’t stuck, and we have to get over this mountain. That’s all there is to it.”

“My legs are shaking, Jack.”

“You can do this. You have to do this.”

They started to climb again, Jack hanging back, watching their progression, monitoring how comfortable Naomi and Cole looked on the rock, telling them how good they were doing and struggling to hide his own fear.

It was almost worse looking up the mountain. He couldn’t see the spires anymore, had no idea how close or far they were from the summit ridge. It was just cold, fissured rock and the deep blue sky above it all and a blinding cornice of sunshine.

He worked his way up a series of ledges in a wide dihedral, and it occurred to him as he climbed that even if they wanted to, going back down now would be an impossibility.

“We taking a rest?” he asked.

His family stood just above him on a grassy ledge

and he climbed the last few feet to them.

“This is bad, Jack.”

“What?”

“This.” She patted the vertical rock. “It just got steeper.”

“There’s another way up,” he said. “Has to be.” He stepped around Naomi and followed the ledge along the rockface, which slimmed down after twenty feet to a lip barely sufficient to support the toes of his shoes.

He sidestepped back over to them. “That way’s no good,” he said, staring up the rock that Dee leaned against. Certainly steeper than anything they’d been on thus far, but the handholds and footholds were prominent, and twelve feet above, a wide crack opened.

“I think we can climb this,” he said.

“Are you crazy?”

“Watch.”

He reached up, slid his fingers into a crack, and pulled himself up. Jammed his foot into a ledge.

“There’s no way, Jack.”

“This really isn’t bad,” he said, though he could feel the threat of a tremor in his right leg, which at the moment, held all of his weight. He lifted his left foot onto a bulging rock and went for another handhold. Seven feet above the grassy ledge now and the world



tilting, an ocean of open air underneath him.

Nothing to do but keep climbing.

The next move brought him to the crack and he squeezed into a space no larger than a coffin.

“Send the kids up,” he said.

“Jack, come on.”

“Just do it, Dee. Cole, can you climb to me, buddy?”

“If they fall—”

“No one’s going to fall. Don’t even put that thought in their head.”

“I can do it, Mom.”

Cole reached up, pulled himself onto the rock.  
“Spot him, Dee.”

“No, Cole.”

“You have to let him go.”

She cried as she raised her arms, said, “Move out of the way, Na, in case he slips. I don’t want him knocking you off the mountain. Cole, you be so careful, baby.”

The boy moved up the rock as if he had no concept of the price for falling. Jack on his knees in the nook, stretching his right arm down as the boy came within range.

“Cole, grab my hand, and I’ll pull you up.”

Cole reached.

Jack got a solid grasp on his wrist, heaved his boy up the rest of the way.

With the cumbersome pack and the shotgun tied to it, the two of them took up every square inch of the recess.

“Dee, you still have the Glock, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I have to get rid of this pack.”

“Jack, no, it has our tent, our sleeping bags, our—”

“I know, believe me. Last thing I want to do, but I can't move in this crack with the pack on, and I've almost fallen twice because of it getting caught up.”

He unhooked the hip belt.

“Jack, please. Think about this.”

“I have.”

“We have to have a tent.”

He unclipped the chest strap.

“We'll make do.”

“How?”

“I don't know. Look out, both of you.” He slid out of the shoulder straps and slung the pack hard enough to clear the ledge.

It fell uninterrupted for a hundred and fifty feet, then struck rock, then bounced through a series of echoing ricochets for another four hundred feet until it vanished in the upper realm of the boulder field, the delayed

sound of its ongoing fall still audible.

“All right, Naomi,” Jack said, “it’s all you.”

She began to climb, either more careful or less sure of herself than Cole.

Halfway to the crack, she froze.

“I’m stuck,” she said.

“You’re not stuck. There’s a great handhold a couple feet up.”

“I can’t hold on much longer. My fingers are—”

“Listen to me, Na. Reach above you and pull yourself up. If you get to that point, I can grab you.”

She looked up at him, tears streaming from the corners of her eyes and so much fear, her entire body trembling, knuckles blanching from the sheer strain of clutching the rock.

“I’m slipping, Daddy.”

“Naomi. Reach up right now or you’re going to fall.”

She lunged for the handhold, and Jack saw her miss it, fingers dancing across smooth rock. He reached so far down he nearly fell out of the nook, catching her wrist as she came off the mountain, her feet dangling over the ledge, one hundred and five pounds slowly tugging Jack’s shoulder out of socket and dragging him off the nook.

“Oh my God, Jack.”

“I’ve got her. Get your feet on the rock, Na.”

“I’m trying.”

“Don’t try. Do it.” She found purchase and Jack pulled with everything he had, walking her up the rock and then over the ledge, all three of them crammed into the nook and Naomi crying hysterically.

“Have a nice life, guys,” Dee said, “because there is no fucking way.”

“Come on, sweetheart. Get up here. It’s cake from here on out.”

“Honestly?”

“Maybe cake is too strong a word. It’s shortbread. How’s that?”

“I hate you so much.”

But she started to climb.

Moving up the crack proved easier, if only because of the illusion of safety—boxed in on three sides and plenty of handholds. They climbed all morning, blisters forming on Jack’s fingertips, and he kept wondering how close it was to midday, the adrenaline rush having skewed his perception of time. Doubted their morale could withstand another night on this mountain.

Thirty feet above, Cole hollered.

Jack’s heart stopped. He looked up, the sun

burning down, couldn't see a thing through its cutting-torch glare.

He shouted, "Everyone okay?"

Dee yelled back, "We're at the top."

Jack stood on the ridge, bracing against the wind and staring east. The mountain fell away beneath them toward pine-covered foothills that downsloped into high desert. Several miles out and one vertical mile below, a highway ran north.

"There it is," Jack said. "I don't see any cars on it."

"Backside of this mountain doesn't look too awful," Dee said.

"No, just long as hell."

Dee lowered herself off the ridge.

"Ready to get off this rock, huh?"

"Like you can't even imagine."

They descended the east slope—a steep boulder field streaked with last year's snow that was hard as asphalt—and evening was coming on by the time they stumbled out of it into the spruce. After two full days on nothing but rock, the moist dirt floor felt like sponge under Jack's feet. He was too tired and sore to register hunger, but his thirst verged on desperation.

"Should we stop?" Dee asked as they hiked

through the darkening woods. "I mean, it's not like we need to find the perfect spot for our tent or anything. Any old piece of ground will do."

"A stream would be nice," he said.

Jack stopped four times so they could hush and listen for the sound of running water, but they never heard it, and exhaustion finally won out.

Jack climbed under a huge spruce tree and broke off as many lower limbs as his strength would allow. His family joined him under the overhanging branches, and they all lay huddled together on the forest floor.

Dee reached over, held Jack's hand.

Cole already asleep.

Hardly any light left in the sky, and what little there was struggled to pass through the spiderweb of branches. Jack wanted to say something to Dee and Naomi before they drifted off, something about how proud he was of them, but he made the mistake of closing his eyes while he tried to think of what he should say.

He woke once in the middle of the night. Pitch black and the patter of rainfall all around them. The branches thick enough over where they slept to keep

them dry. Jack's body was cold but he could still feel the glow of the sunburn in his face. Brightness when he shut his eyes. Thinking, water is falling out there. Water. But thirsty as he was, he couldn't bring himself to move.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE woods smelled of last night's rainfall and everything still dripped. They could've laid there all day under the tree watching the light spill through the branches, but he made them get up. Two full days since their last sip of water at that high lake on the other side of the mountain, and he fought a raging headache.

They left while it was still early. No trail to follow but the path of least resistance, slowly winding their way down through the spruce. Cole couldn't walk, so Jack carried him on his shoulders. He felt dizzy, his legs cramping, thinking he should have dragged them all out from under the tree last night and made a catch for the rain. They were dying of thirst, and he'd let a shot at water pass them by.

Midafternoon and stumbling through the woods like

zombies. Back down into pine trees, descending toward desert and the heat of it and the tang of dry sage in the upslope wind.

They would've missed it but for Cole.

The boy said, "Look." Pointed toward a boulder a little ways off in the trees with a dark streak running down its face that glimmered where the sun struck it.

Jack lifted his son off his shoulders and set him down and ran for it, hurdling two logs and sliding to a stop on his knees in the wet mud at the base.

A steady trickle the width of a string ran off the lip of the rock. He bent down and took a sip, just one to make sure it tasted safe, the water down his throat so cold and sweet he had to physically tear himself away from it.

"How is it?" Dee said. "Safe to drink?"

"Like nothing you ever tasted." Jack stood, traced the stream to where it disappeared into rock. "It's a spring," he said. "Come here, Cole." He helped his son down onto the wet mud and held his mouth under the stream for thirty seconds.

"All right, buddy, let's give sister a shot."

They each got a half minute under the trickle, and then, beginning with Cole, took turns, each as long as they wanted, drinking their fill.

It was torture watching his children gulp down



mouthful after mouthful, so Jack wandered away from the boulder to look for a place for them to sleep. Came upon it almost instantly—a stretch of dirt underneath an overhang that would probably keep them dry unless a wild storm blew in. He picked out all of the rocks from the dirt and found some patches of moss nearby which he peeled off the ground and spread out like plush moist carpeting. He sat down on the moss in the shade of the overhang and stared at the sky through the tops of the trees. Didn't have his watch but he bet it was four or five in the afternoon. The light getting long and the clouds dissipating. The chill coming.

While his family slept, Jack lay under the trickle of water. It took fourteen seconds for his mouth to fill, and then he'd swallow and open again. Laid there forty minutes watching the sky darken, drinking until his stomach bloated and sloshed.

Their wet clothes froze during the night and they lay shivering under the overhang while the moon lifted above the desert. Jack got up and wandered out into the woods and broke off as many limbs as he could find. All pine—the needles densely clustered. Carried an armful back to their pitiful camp and laid the

branches over the tangle of bodies that comprised his family.

He stood watching them.

Looked back toward the west, the mountain they'd scaled looming in the dark.

Broken granite shining in the moonlight.

And he felt something like a drug enter his bloodstream—several heartbeats of pride coursing through him, only it wasn't really pride. Just knowledge. Clarity. A brief window passing through his field of vision. He saw himself objectively, what he'd done, how with his hands and his brain and his handling of fear, he'd kept his family alive this far, a realization surfacing, and it was this: a part of him needed this, loved this, loved being strong for them, going hungry and thirsty for them, even killing for them. He knew he would do it again and without a moment's hesitation. Hell, a part of him might even welcome it. There was simply nothing in his experience that even compared with the thrill of killing to protect his family. In this moment, it was the purpose of his existence.

He felt, possibly for the first time in his life, like a fucking man.

At last, he crawled under the branches and wrapped his arms around his son.

Cole's teeth chattered. "I'm cold," the boy said.

“You’ll warm up.”

“When?”

“In a minute.”

“Can you die of cold?”

“Yeah, but that’s not going to happen to you.”

“I’m still not warm.”

“Be patient. It’s coming.”

\* \* \* \* \*

JACK woke at dawn and laid his hands upon his children.

“They’re breathing,” Dee whispered.

“You sleep?”

“Not much.”

“We stink,” he said.

“Speak for yourself.”

“No, I think I can safely speak for you, too.”

He looked at his wife just to look at her. First time he’d done that in days.

Her cheeks smeared with dirt. Lips cracked. Sunburned all to hell.

“You’ve got a few dreadlocks starting there,” he said.

“I’m hideous, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a tad.”

“You smoothtalker.” She reached across the kids, touched his hand. “We can’t keep doing this,” she said. “You know that, don’t you?”

“We’re almost out of these mountains, Dee. It’s going to get better then.”

“Or worse.”

“Do you believe we’re headed for someplace safe, where we can survive? Maybe get back what we lost?”

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“I think you need to believe that’s what’s going to happen.”

“It’s just so hard. I’m so tired. I’m hungry. And then I look at them and know they’re suffering even more.”

“We could be dead, Dee. All of us or some of us. But we’re not. We’re together. You have to hold onto that. Let it carry you.”

They came out of the woods in the late morning onto a bare hill that sloped down to a river, and several hundred yards past, a paved road. Beyond it all to the east lay miles of badlands—pale, dry country, rippled and treeless.

They worked their way down through the sage to the riverbank and stopped for a drink.

Jack lifted Cole onto his shoulders and waded

across, Dee and Naomi following behind, his daughter gasping at the icy shock of the water, which was low in advance of winter, coming only to their knees at the deepest point.

On the other side, at the top of a small rise, they rested in the weeds and watched the road.

Nothing passed. No sound but the river and the wind blowing through the grass.

Early afternoon and low gray clouds streaming across the sky from the west.

Jack stepped into the road. Saw a quarter mile of it from where he stood.

Looking back, that rampart of mountains they'd crossed two days ago soared above everything, powdered with snow.

"What if a car comes?" Dee said. "There's no way to know if they're affected."

"We'll have to make a split-second decision," Jack said. "If it's only one car, with one or two people inside, maybe we chance it. Otherwise, we hide."

They walked north along the shoulder.

"Let me have the gun, Dee."

She handed him the Glock and he ejected the magazine, thumbed out the rounds—nine—and loaded them back.

“Do you know what road this is?” Dee asked.

“I think it’s Highway 287.”

“Where does it go?”

“To the Tetons, then north up to Yellowstone and into Montana.”

“We want to go to Montana?” Naomi asked.

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Because after Montana comes Canada, and we might be safe there.”

They walked for several hours. No cars passed. The road seemed to be some kind of geographic dividing line—badlands to the east, foothills rising toward mountains in the west.

The clouds thickened and by late afternoon the first raindrops had begun to splatter on the pavement. They had walked about two miles, Jack figured, and hadn’t seen a glimmer of civilization beyond the telephone poles that ran alongside the west shoulder of the road.

“We have to get out of this rain,” Jack said.

They went across the road and up into the trees—tall, straight pines that offered little in the way of shelter.

It was getting dark and the sound of the rainfall filled the woods with a steady hiss.

They sat down against one of the pines, and Jack could instantly feel the difference in his legs from just a few hours of walking on pavement. His knees swollen. Shins riddled with pain like a million tiny fractures. He grimaced as he stood back up.

“I’m going to look for something to keep us dry.”

“Please don’t go far, Jack.”

He wandered away from them up the hillside through the old-growth forest.

After a quarter mile, he came out of the trees.

Stopped, chuckled.

He led them up through the woods into the clearing, gestured proudly toward their accommodations for the evening—the ruins of a stable.

“It ain’t the Hilton,” he said. “But it’ll keep us dry.”

The logs were so weathered and sun-bleached they looked albino. The tin roof, deep brown with rust, only covered half of the shelter, and they filed into the far right corner on the only patch of dry dirt.

The rain drummed on the tin roof.

“We’re lucky to be out of the mountains,” Jack said. “Probably snowing up there.”

Through the doorway, they could see the rain falling and watch the world getting dark—a grayness deepening toward blue.

Cole crawled into Jack's lap, said, "My stomach hurts."

"I know, buddy, we're all hungry."

"When can we eat?"

"We'll find something tomorrow."

"You promise?"

"He can't promise, Cole," Naomi said. "He doesn't know for sure if we'll find anything to eat tomorrow. All we can do is try."

Cole began to cry.

Jack kissed his head, Cole's hair still wet, said, "Hush, baby boy."

It was still raining. They hadn't moved from their corner and they weren't going to be moving anytime soon with it so black out there they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces.

"I wish we could have a fire," Naomi said.

"That would be nice."

"I know how," Cole said suddenly, just a voice in the dark.

"How to have a fire?" Dee said.

"How we can tell if they're good or bad."

"Who are you talking about, honey?"

"If we hear a car coming down the road."

"You've been thinking about that?"



“If they have the light around them, we’ll know they’re bad.”

Jack said, “What light, buddy?”

“The light around their head.”

“What’s he talking about, Jack?”

“I have no idea. Cole, what light do you mean? Do we have it around any of us? Me or your mother or sister?”

“No.”

“Do you have it around you?”

The boy was quiet for a moment. “Yes.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like white light around my head and my shoulders.”

“Why is it around you and not us?”

“Because you didn’t see the lights. They didn’t fall on you.”

“Remember when I asked you if you felt different after the aurora?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any bad feelings toward any of us right now?”

“No, Daddy.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I don’t want to sleep in here with him.”

“Stop it, Naomi. He’s your brother.”

“He’s affected. He saw the lights like the rest of those crazy—”

“He’s a child.”

“So what?”

“Has he tried to hurt you or any of us?”

“No.”

“So maybe it doesn’t affect children the same way.”

“Why would that be?” Dee asked.

“I don’t know. Because they’re innocent?”

Cole began to cry. “I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“I know you don’t,” Jack said, and he pulled the boy into his arms.

Jack woke several hours later to Cole moaning.

“Dee?”

“What is it?”

Still couldn’t see a thing in the dark.

“Something’s wrong with Cole. He’s shivering.”

Dee's hand slid over his and onto the boy's face.

"Oh, Jesus, he's burning up."

"Why's he shaking?"

"He has the chills. Let me have him."

She took Cole into her arms and rocked him and hushed him and Jack lay in the dirt as the sound of rain striking the tin roof tried to carry him off.

\* \* \* \* \*

COLE looked pale in the gray dawnlight that filtered into the ruins of the stable.

Jack said, "What is it do you think?"

"I can't tell if it's viral or bacterial, but it's getting worse."

"We'll stay here for the day. Let him rest."

"A fever is very dehydrating. He needs water."

"You want to keep moving?"

"I think we have to."

"What else can we do for him?"

Tears welling, she shook her head. "Let's try to find some water, then get him someplace warm and dry. That's all we can do."

Dark swollen clouds.

Cold.

Everything wet and dripping.

Jack carried Cole in his arms.

The boy had woken but his eyes were milky and unfocused. Not present.

They went down through the pine forest to the road.

The first mile was a straight and steady climb. Then the road curved through a series of switchbacks, and when Jack looked down again, Cole was sleeping.

In the bend of the next turn, he stopped and squatted down in the road, keeping Cole's head supported so he wouldn't wake.

"There's no way," Jack said. "I could carry him on my shoulders for a little while longer, but not like this."

"We can rest," Dee said.

"Resting isn't going to make my arms stronger. He weighs fifty-four pounds. I just can't physically hold him."

He looked around. They had hiked up into snow—a sloppy inch of it upon everything except the asphalt, the evergreen branches dipping and bouncing back as the snow sloughed off.

"Jack, what do you—"

"Just let me rest for a minute. He's sleeping, and I don't want to wake him."

They sat in the road. Everything still except the

melting snow. The wind in the spruce trees. Cole shivered in his sleep and Jack wrapped his jacket around him. Every five minutes, Dee would lay her hand against the boy's forehead.

Naomi asked, "Is he going to die?"

"Of course not," Jack said.

They ate enough snow to quench their thirst and make them all much colder, and Jack fed Cole pieces of slush. After an hour, they struggled onto their feet and went on. The road kept climbing. Soon there was slush on the pavement, then snow. Instead of cradling him, Jack found he could manage the weight better by carrying Cole draped over his left shoulder. They would walk a ways and then stop and start up again, the periods of walking getting shorter, the rests longer.

It snowed off and on through the day, the road leading them back up into high country. Toward late afternoon, they came across a deserted construction site, Jack's heart lifting at the prospect of finding a pickup truck or even a forklift, but the only motorized equipment left behind had been a small crane, its snow-dusted framework looming over stockpiles of corrugated steel drainage pipe.

They spent the night inside one of the sixty-foot

lengths of pipe, Jack sitting by the opening watching the snow come down until the light was gone. Listening to Dee whisper to Cole, the boy crying, mumbling gibberish, delirious with fever. Considering the state of their distressed little nation, he had no intention of falling asleep, but he shut his eyes just for a moment and

\* \* \* \* \*

WHEN he opened them again, it was light out and the sky bright blue through the spruce trees and a half foot of fresh snow on the ground.

Naomi's snoring echoed through the pipe.

He looked over at Dee who was awake and still holding Cole.

She said, "His fever broke about an hour ago."

Had he been standing, the relief would have knocked Jack over.

"Did you even sleep?" he asked.

She shook her head. "But I can feel it coming now."

Jack looked outside, snow glittering in the early sunlight. "I'm going to have a look around."

"Food today," she said.

"What?"

"One way or another, we have to find some food.

Today. It'll have been five days tonight since we last ate, and at some point in the not too distant, we won't have the strength to keep moving. Our bodies just cannot continue to perform like this."

He looked past Dee toward his daughter, sleeping in the shadows. "Na's okay?"

"She's okay."

"You?"

Dee broke a smile. "I've lost probably twenty, twenty-five pounds these last three weeks. I can't stop thinking how hot I'd look in a little bikini."

Jack crossed the construction site, climbed up onto the track of the crane. The door had been left unlocked and he scoured the cab. Found three balled-up potato chip bags and a paper cup filled a quarter of the way with what appeared to be frozen cola.

He set the cup in the sun and moved back between the rows of stacked pipe.

The road was covered in snow.

He went up the hill, inhaling deep shots of freezing, snow-cleansed air. His stomach groaned. It felt good to be up early and walking in the woods with the sun streaming through the trees.

Someone shouted.

Jack stopped in the road, glanced back, but the

sound hadn't come from the construction site.

More voices spilled down through the trees.

He deliberated for three seconds, then started up the road, fighting for traction as he sprinted through powder.

The voices getting louder.

When he came around the next curve, there was a green sign that read "Togwotee Pass, ELEV 9658."

In the distance, a lodge. Gas station. Tiny cabins off in the spruce trees.

The parking lot was crowded with an array of vehicles—dozen civilian cars and SUVs, three Humvees, two armored personnel carriers, one Stryker, a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, and a big rig with two Red Cross insignias emblazoned on the trailer that framed the words, "Refugee Relief."

Jack headed toward a group of men in woodland camo BDUs standing by the gas pumps. One of them spotted him, and without a word to the others, shouldered his M16 which had been fitted with a nightscope. The rest of the men saw his reaction, drew their own weapons, and turned to face Jack.

He stopped, staring at five men pointing a variety of firearms in his direction, and the first thing to cross his mind was that it had been nine days since they'd fled the cabin, and how strange it felt to see people who



weren't his family again.

"Where'd you come from?"

Jack bent over to catch his breath, pointed back down the road. The man closest to him was the one who'd spoken. A redhead. Very pale. Freckled. Looked to be his age, his height, but with thirty added pounds of muscle and only a two-day beard. He pointed a Sig Sauer at Jack's face.

Said, "You're on foot?"

"Yes."

"Carrying any weapons?" Jack had to think, realized he'd left the Glock back at the pipe with Dee, and considering the firepower on hand, figured that was probably a good thing.

"No, nothing."

The man waved a hand toward the others and they lowered their machineguns.

"Where you from?"

Jack straightened. "Albuquerque. Been hiking through the mountains last week and a half. Haven't had food in five days."

The man holstered his pistol and smiled, said, "Well, by God, somebody get this man an MRE," but no one moved.

He had blue eyes the color of a washed-out summer sky and he was squinting a little in the sun.

“Good thing you caught us. We were on the verge of moving out.”

“I’m Jack Colclough.” Jack stepped forward and extended his hand, which the man accepted.

“Good to meet you, Jack. My name. . .” The elbow caught Jack on the chin. He sat down in the snow as the reinforced steel toe of a black leather combat boot slammed into his face. “. . .is not really important.” Jack opened his eyes. He lay on his back, the redhead’s face inches from his own and the blue sky distorted by tears that streamed out of his eyes from his crushed nose. “Who else is with you?”

“No one.”

The man’s hand wrapped around his ring finger and twisted until Jack felt the bone snap and he howled as the man stood on his arm and unsheathed a knife.

When Jack came to, the man was holding his ring finger in front of his face and sliding the gold wedding band up and down the free-range digit.

“Where is the person who put this ring on your finger?”

The pain reached up through Jack’s entire left arm like a molten rod he couldn’t shake free.

The man unholstered his Sig Sauer, pushed the barrel into Jack’s left eye. “Sir, I will put a bullet

through your cornea.”

“They’re dead,” Jack said. “You crazy fuckers killed them.”

Dee opened her eyes, the sound of cranking engines having stirred her from sleep. She eased Cole down onto the floor of the pipe and crawled outside.

The sun-glare blinding off the snow.

She called for Jack.

Scanned the construction site but didn’t see him.

Hurried through the snow into the road as other engines roared to life.

They weren’t far—just a short distance through the trees—and she was running up the road now toward a clearing.

She rounded a turn. There was an oasis at the top of the pass. Military vehicles rumbled in the parking lot, and for a moment her heart lightened and she thought they were saved until her eyes fell upon two soldiers a hundred feet away, dragging a bloody-faced man by his arms toward the open doors of an eighteen-wheeler.

Jack.

She started toward him, got three steps before the mother inside her screamed louder than the wife. Out

in the open now. The noise of two dozen engines was deafening and the air was filling with exhaust. The men were pulling her husband up the ramp into the back of the truck while two other soldiers aimed their weapons into the darkness of the semitrailer. She held the Glock, but in the face of all this, it felt like a bad joke. That voice inside her begging to run. Someone was going to see her and chase her into the woods, kill her or take her away, and then her children would be alone out here and she couldn't imagine anything worse than that.

She backpedaled off the road into the woods and crouched down in a thicket of spruce saplings as the Bradley Fighting Vehicle lurched out of the parking lot into the road, leading the convoy down the west side of the pass. Other cars and SUVs fell in behind as Jack's legs disappeared into the trailer. Soon after, the two soldiers emerged and lowered the rear door. Latched it, hopped down onto the pavement, lifted the metal ramp, walked it underneath the bed of the truck. They ran to the Stryker and one of them ducked into the back while the other climbed up onto the roof and manned the 50-cal.

The big rig lumbered out of the parking lot, tailed by the Stryker, and it felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest as she watched the convoy begin to

slip away, rolling down the other side of the mountain.

In an instant, it was gone. All she could hear was the transfer truck downshifting on a steep grade. Then the top of the pass stood silent. No wind. No birds cheeping. Just the sun pouring down onto the snow.

Dee leaned over into the ice and came apart.

She staggered back into the road and followed it down the east side of the pass. Her throat raw from crying and she still held clumps of her hair that she'd ripped out. Desperate to do something to fix this but she couldn't. That helplessness felt like loose electricity under her skin—wild and frantic but with no outlet. The urge to put the gun to her own head bordered on irresistible.

She reached the construction site and walked over to the pipe. Her children still slept. She crawled inside and sat with her knees drawn into her chest, trying not to cry again so they might sleep a little longer. Jack was slipping farther and farther away with every passing second, and she could feel the expanding distance and it tore her guts out.

Naomi was stirring. Dee turned and stared into the shadow of the pipe, watched her daughter sit up and rub her eyes.

She looked around.

“Where’s Dad?”

Dee whispered, “Come outside. I don’t want to wake Cole.”

“What’s wrong?”

The tears were starting up in her eyes again. “Just come on.”

When Dee told her daughter what had happened, Naomi cupped her hand to her mouth and ran to a far stack of pipes and crawled into one on the bottom row. Dee stood in the snow with her eyes welling up again, listening to the pipe distort Naomi’s sobbing like some tragic flute.

Cole stared at her, grave as she’d ever seen him, but he didn’t cry. They were sitting on a patch of dry pavement in the road in the warmth of high-altitude sunlight.

“Where did they take him?” the boy asked.

“I don’t know, honey.”

“Why did they?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are they going to kill him?”

The questions came like little stabs of reinforcement, shoring up the horrific reality of it all.

“I don’t know.”

Cole looked back toward the construction site.

“When is Naomi going to come out?”

“In a little while. She’s really upset.”

“Are you upset?”

“Yeah, I’m upset.”

“When can we see Daddy again?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Cole.”

The boy stared at a trickle of snowmelt gliding down the pavement. “This is one of the worst things that ever happened, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She could tell he was mulling something over, sorting out the ramifications.

“If we don’t find Daddy, does that mean you’re my wife and I get to be in charge of Naomi?”

Dee wiped her face.

“No, sweetheart, it doesn’t mean that.”

In the afternoon, Dee walked over to the pipe where Naomi had holed herself up for hours and crouched down by the opening. Inside, her daughter lay unmoving, and she reached out, touched her ankle.

“Na? You asleep?”

Naomi’s head shook.

“There are some buildings just up the road. I thought we could check them out, see if there’s food.

Warm beds to sleep in.”

No movement. No answer.

“You can’t lay here indefinitely, wishing things aren’t the way they are.”

“I know that, Mom. I know that. Can you just give me thirty minutes, please?”

“Okay. But then we have to leave.”

The shadows stretched as they walked through slush to the top of the pass.

The lodge had been vandalized.

The restaurant raided.

Refrigerators contained nothing but rotting vegetables and fruit. Spoiled jars of condiments that she almost considered eating.

Dee had to break glass to gain entry to one of the tiny cabins. They climbed through the windowframe. Just as cold on the inside, but at least there were two bunk beds along the wall.

The kids crawled into bed and Dee unlocked the door and went back outside. Walked down to the road and stood at the crest of the pass. Thirty-five miles away, Grand Teton punctured the bottom curve of the sun and the nearer peaks were catching alpenglow. The snow and the rock the color of peach skin.



Watched the sun drop, wondering where Jack was in all that darkness.

She closed her eyes, spoke aloud.

“Jack, do you hear me? Wherever you are, whatever’s happening to you in this moment, know that I love you. And I’m with you. Always.”

She’d never said anything with such desperation. Closest she’d ever come to prayer. Wondered if the intensity of what raged inside her could carry the words to him on some secret frequency.

Beneath the stars, she started back toward her children, the snow crunching under her footsteps. A part of her still thinking that when she walked into that little cabin, Jack would be there, her sensory memory still operating on the default of his proximity.

In the total darkness of the cabin, she could hear Cole and Naomi breathing deeply. She pulled off her crumbling shoes and took a bottom bunk—sheeted mattress, no blanket. Hoped her children dreamed of something other than what their life had become.

\* \* \* \* \*

IN the morning, Naomi had barely the strength to rise out of bed, and the prodding it took rivaled the difficulty Dee had experienced trying to rouse her two

months ago on the first school day of the year.

They wandered outside, having slept through most of the morning, and now it was almost warm and the sun was high and there were only patches of snow in the shadows and the forest. They ate as much of it as they could get down.

The pavement was dry. They started down the other side of the pass, Dee cold and more lightheaded than when she donated blood. The spruce trees and the sky seemed to have lost their vibrancy, almost sepia-toned, and the sounds of the forest and their footsteps on the road came muffled.

She wondered if they were dying.

In the midafternoon, Dee glanced up and saw that Naomi was sitting in the road, swaying over the double yellow like windblown sawgrass.

Dee eased down beside her.

“Are we stopping?” Cole asked.

“Yeah, for a minute.”

The boy walked over to the shoulder to investigate a brown sign riddled with buckshot that warned, You Are Now in Grizzly Bear Country.

“I think a rest is a good idea,” Dee said.

“I’m not resting.”

“Then what is this?”

“I’m so hungry and tired and Dad’s probably dead. I just want to die now, too.”

“Don’t say that.”

Naomi turned slowly and stared at her mother. “Don’t you? Be honest.”

“We have to keep going, Na.”

“Why do you say that? We don’t have to do anything. We can stay right here and waste away or you can put us all out of our miseries right now.”

Her eyes flickered at the Glock tucked into Dee’s waistline.

It surprised Dee as much as it did Naomi when she slapped her daughter hard across the face.

Whispered, “You get the fuck up right now, young lady, or I will drag your little ass down this mountain so help me God. I didn’t raise you to quit.”

Dee struggled back onto her feet as Naomi slumped across the road and wept with what little energy she still had.

Dee crying, too. “Come on, Cole, let’s go.”

“What’s wrong with Naomi?”

“She’ll be okay. Just needs a minute.”

“Are we leaving her?”

“No, she’ll be right along.”

They had covered barely a mile by evening when

they left the road for a boulder-strewn meadow. No snow or running water anywhere. As the thirst stalked them, all Dee could think about was all the snow they'd passed up earlier in the day, how she should have taken a container from the restaurant at the pass, packed it with ice for later.

The ground was soft and moist from the recent snowfall, and they curled up on the far side of a boulder, hidden from the road, everyone asleep before the stars came out.

\* \* \* \* \*

DEE woke with the sun in her face and a dehydration headache. Her children slept and she let them go on sleeping. Lethargic and hopeless. Nothing more unappealing than rising from the cool soft grass to trudge on down that road.

She lay there, gliding in and out of consciousness, always returning to the question—where are you? And—are you? It seemed impossible that he could be gone and she not know. Not feel it in the pit of her soul.

She lay facing her daughter, Naomi's eyes half

open, blades of dead-yellow grass trembling between them that Dee had been giving serious thought to eating.

“I hurt everywhere,” Naomi said.

“I know.”

“Are we dying, Mom?”

How to answer such a question.

“We’re in rough shape, baby.”

“Is it going to hurt a lot worse than this? Toward the end, I mean.”

“I don’t know.”

“How much longer?”

“Naomi. I don’t know.”

Dee had completely lost time, and whether the sun’s position in the sky indicated late morning or early afternoon, she couldn’t tell. She reached over and put her hand to Cole’s back. Confirmed the rise and the fall. The boy slept against the boulder and she could feel the cold radiating from the rock.

When Dee rolled back over toward her daughter, Naomi was sitting up in the grass. Dee thinking her zygomatic bones seemed extraordinarily pronounced, the bones like crescent moons forming the lower range of her hollowed-out eye sockets.

“You hear that?” Naomi said.

Dee did. A sound like sustained thunder. She

looked up, said, "It's above us, Na."

A jet, too distant to discern the type, streaked across the sky, its contrail iridescent in the brilliant blue.

Night and freezing cold. Dee lying with her back against the boulder, Cole shivering in her arms. The children slept, but she'd been awake for an hour, fighting black thoughts. She hadn't intended to lie in this meadow all day. Between the weakness and exhaustion, it had just happened. But tomorrow would involve a choice, and knowing they'd only be more exhausted, thirstier, and in greater agony, she was already making excuses for why they shouldn't push on. Basking in the increasingly soothing presence of what lay two feet away in the grass, just within arm's reach.

Naomi shook her awake.

"Mom, get up."

Dee opened her eyes to her daughter silhouetted against the sweep of stars and leaning over her.

"What's wrong, Na?" It hurt to speak, her throat swollen.

"Someone's coming."

"Give me a hand."

She extricated herself from Cole's embrace and grabbed onto Naomi's arm and tugged herself upright.

Sat listening.

At first, nothing. Then she discerned the sound of an engine still a long ways off, had to strain to tell if it was fading away or approaching.

"It's coming toward us, Mom."

Dee used the boulder to pull herself onto her feet. She picked up the Glock, the metal glazed with frost. They walked through the alpine meadow to the shoulder of the road. The double yellow glowing in the starlight, and the noise of the approaching car getting louder, like a wave coming ashore.

Dee's leg muscles burned. The warmth of her hand had melted some of the frost off the Glock, and she used her shirt to wipe the condensation and ice from the steel.

"Go back to the boulder, Na."

"What are you going to do?"

Dee slipped the Glock into a side pocket of her rain jacket. "When you hear me call out, wake Cole and bring him over, but not until. And if it doesn't go right, something happens, you hide, and take care of your brother."

"Mom—"

“We don’t have time. Go.”

Naomi ran back into the meadow and Dee stepped out into the road, searching for the glint of headlights through the trees, but there was nothing save for the noise of the approaching engine.

A shadow blitzed around the corner.

She had intended to lay down on the pavement, but she didn’t have the guts for that now facing a car with no headlights barreling toward her in the dark of night, so she just stood straddling the double yellow line and waving her arms like a madwoman.

Inside of a hundred yards, the RPMs fell off and the glow of brakelights fired the asphalt red and the tires screeched against the pavement, Dee shielding her eyes from the imminent collision but not yielding an inch.

Then the engine idled two feet away from her and the smell of scorched rubber filled the air. She lowered her arm from her face as the driver’s door squeaked open. It was a Jeep Cherokee, dark green or brown—impossible to tell in this light—with four fuel containers strapped to the roof.

“You trying to commit suicide?” the man growled.

Dee took out the Glock, lined it up in the center of his chest. By the glow that emanated from the Jeep’s interior lights, she could see that he was older—short



brown hair on top, a great white beard, salt and pepper mustache that struggled to merge the two. He held something in his left hand.

“Drop it,” she said.

When he hesitated, she sighted up his face, and something in her eyes must have persuaded him, because a gun clattered onto the pavement.

“You’re ambushing me?”

Dee shouted for the kids, heard them come running in the dark.

“Grab the top of the door,” Dee said.

He complied as Naomi and Cole hustled across the road.

On the door below the window, Dee noticed a National Park Service emblem.

“Do you see him, Cole?” Dee said as he sidled up beside her.

“Yes.”

She wouldn’t take her eyes off the man.

“Does he have any light around his head?”

“Lady, what are you—”

“Be quiet.”

“No, Mom.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes.”

Still, she didn’t lower the gun. “What’s your name,

“sir?”

“Ed.”

“Ed what?”

“Abernathy.”

“What are you doing out here, Mr. Abernathy?”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Girl with the gun gets the answers.”

“I’m trying to survive.”

“We aren’t affected,” she said.

“Neither am I.”

“I know.”

“How exactly do you know?”

“You have water and food?”

He nodded, and it was just a flash of a thought—considering their present state, what the world had become, Dee should kill him right now and take his Jeep and whatever provisions it contained. Not fuck around for one more second, because there was too much at stake. Pulling the trigger, though, was another thing. Maybe he was a good guy, maybe not, but she couldn’t shoot him in cold blood, not even for her children, and maybe because of them.

“There were four of us.” Tears coming. “My husband was taken two days ago by some sort of military unit. Do you know where he might be?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“We haven’t eaten in a week.” Dee felt unstable, eased her right leg back to brace herself against falling. “I don’t want to keep aiming this gun at your face.”

“That’d be all right with me, too.”

She lowered the Glock, slid it into the back of her waistband.

Ed started to bend down. Stopped midway. “I’m picking up my gun, but there’s no threat intended.”

“Okay.”

He ducked behind the door, lifted the revolver off the pavement, and came toward them. Squatted down to Cole’s eye-level.

“I’m Ed,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Cole didn’t reply.

“Tell him your name, buddy.”

“Cole.”

“Do you like Snickers candy bars?”

Dee’s stomach fluttered with a new pang of hunger.

“Yes sir.”

“Well, you’re in luck.”

“Are you a nice person?”

“I am. Are you?”

Cole nodded and Ed pushed against his knees and stood to face Naomi.

“I’m Naomi,” she said.

“Glad to meet you, Naomi.”

Dee extended her hand. “Ed, I’m Dee.”

“Dee, very nice to meet you.”

The upwelling came so fast and unexpectedly that she fell toward Ed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Sobbing. Felt him patting her back, couldn’t pick out the words, but the deep tone of his voice which seemed to move through her like thunder was the closest she’d come to comfort in days.

Ed pulled the Cherokee into the meadow and got out and popped the hatch. Dee and the kids gathered around as he rifled through a banker’s box of packaged food. Three more plastic gas containers crowded the backseats, numerous jugs of water on the floorboards.

Dee sat in the back with Naomi and Cole, her fingers over-anxious and shaking as she ripped open Cole’s wrapper. At the smell of chocolate and peanuts, her hunger swelled into an ache.

They had two candy bars each and several apples, shared a gallon of water from a glass jug. So ravenous it felt less like eating and drinking, more like finally breathing again after being held underwater. When they’d finished, it was all Dee could do not to beg for more, but from the look of things, Ed was light

on provisions.

“Where you coming from?” she asked.

He sat in the grass near the rear bumper, just inside the field of illumination thrown from the Jeep’s rear dome light. “Arches in Utah.”

“You a park ranger?”

“Yep.”

“We left Albuquerque. . .I don’t know, three weeks ago, I guess? What day it is.”

“Friday. Well, early Saturday now.”

“We were trying to get to Canada. Heard there were refugee camps across the border.”

“I heard the same.”

“Have you run into much trouble?”

He shook his head. “I left three days ago. Been traveling mainly at night, and in fact, I actually need to keep moving.”

He rose to his feet. Dee noticed he wore green pants and a long-sleeved, gray button-up, wondered if this was his ranger uniform.

She said, “Would you let us come with you?”

“I can’t fit you all inside.”

“Then take my children.”

“Mom, no.”

“Shut up, Na. Would you? Please?”

Ed took out his revolver.

“I need you out of my Jeep right now. I’ve given you some of my food, my water. I’ll even leave a jug with you, but I cannot take you.”

Dee stared down at her filthy, stinking shoes.

“We’ll die out here.”

“And we may all die if you come with me. Now get out of there. I have to go.”

Dee stood watching the Jeep move across the meadow and into the road, heard the engine rev, saw its taillights wink out, listening as it sped away from them into the darkness.

Naomi was crying. “You should’ve shot him, Mom. You had him back there with his gun on the ground and you just let him—”

“He’s not a bad man, Na.”

“We’re going to die now.”

“He wasn’t trying to hurt us. You want to live in a world where we have to kill innocent people to survive? I won’t do that. Not even for you and Cole. There’s things worse than dying, and for me, that’s one of them.”

Cole said, “Listen.”

An engine was approaching. The shadow of that Jeep reappeared and shot out a triangle of light as it entered the meadow.

The engine cut off.

Ed climbed out.

"I'm not happy about this," he said, walking around to the back, popping the hatch. "Not one goddamn bit. So don't say anything, for God's sake don't thank me. Just get over here and help me make some room."

Ed loaded what would fit into the cargo area and made just enough room for Naomi and Cole in the backseat. Dee climbed in up front, buckled herself in, and Ed cranked the engine. Heat rushed out of the vents. The digital clock read 2:59 a.m. Ed put the car into gear and eased across the meadow, over the shoulder, back onto the road.

Turned on the stereo as he accelerated.

Dirty blues blasting from the speakers: "She's a kindhearted woman, she studies evil all the time/She's a kindhearted woman, she studies evil all the time/You well's to kill me, as to have it on your mind."

Dee leaned against the window, watched the trees rush by. Felt so strange to be moving this fast again, the pavement streaming under the tires. The road snaked down through the spruce forest on a steep descent from the pass and her ears kept popping and clogging, the world loud, then muffled, then loud again

when she swallowed. With the moon full and high, it struck the road like sunlight and made shadows of the trees. The view to the west was long, and through the windshield she could see the massive skyline of the Tetons.

Dee glanced back between the front seats—Cole and Naomi sleeping sprawled across each other. She reached over, touched Ed's shoulder.

"You saved our lives."

"What'd I say about thanking me?"

"I'm not thanking you, just stating a fact."

"Yeah, but I didn't want to, that's the thing. I'm a supremely selfish fuck."

Dee tilted her seat back. "Let me know if you want me to drive."

He grunted, his hands tapping time to the blues, Dee wondering if he'd have sung along if they weren't in the car with him.

"You can sing if you want," she said. "Won't bother us."

"Might want to be more careful about what you offer in the future," he said, and started to sing.

His voice was awful.

She dozed against the window, dipping in and out of dream fragments that she couldn't quite commit



herself to before settling finally into a hard and dreamless sleep.

Next time she woke, it was 5:02 a.m.

Still dark out the windows except where the faintest purple had begun to tint the eastern sky. Naomi and Cole slept. The music had stopped.

“Want me to drive for a bit so you can sleep?”

“No, I was going to stop a few miles ahead anyway. Get us off the road for the daylight hours.”

\* \* \* \* \*

THE lodge towered like a mountain against the predawn sky. They pulled under the front portico. The kids were stirring, woken by the cessation of movement. Ed turned off the engine and stepped out and opened the back hatch. Took a flashlight from one of the supply boxes.

The red double doors stood ajar and they pushed through them.

Ed flicked on the flashlight.

“Anybody here?” His voice echoed through the immense lobby as the beam of his light passed across the hearth and moved up seven stories of framework supported by a forest of burnished tree trunks.

No response.

“Ever been here?” Ed asked.

“Once,” Dee said.

They climbed the stairs to a row of rooms that overlooked the upper porch. Dee and the kids took one with two queen beds. The walls were cedar-paneled. A cast-iron radiator occupied the space beneath the window, and they didn't need a flashlight anymore with dawn fading up through the dormer.

Ed said, “I sort of feel like one of us should keep watch. Case someone comes.”

“You drove all night,” Dee said. “I'll do it.”

“Five or six hours, I'll be good as new. Wake me at noon.”

Dee strolled the corridors in near darkness. The silence of the place imposing. She'd been here before with Jack. Sixteen years ago. A summer day, the lobby bustling and filled with light. They were passing through on a move from Montana to New Mexico, Jack having just been hired by UNM, Dee en route to begin a residency at the university hospital. They'd only stopped for a few hours to have lunch in the dining room, but she still recalled the feel of that day, had never lost it—a lightness in her being and with the two of them married just four months, the

sense that they were really beginning a life, that everything lay open and accessible before them.

She walked down to the lobby and went outside, following the paved path to the observation point. The day had dawned clear. Across the basin, a herd of elk grazed the edge of a lodgepole pine forest still recovering from a recent fire and interspersed with dead gray trees.

After a while, a column of water launched out of the earth, steaming in the cold. There had been five hundred tourists here the last time Dee had watched it blow. She listened to the superheated water rain down on the mineralized field, a light wind in her face, the mist lukewarm by the time it reached her.

In the early afternoon, she and Ed made the climb to the widow's walk, stood on top of the lodge looking out over the basin and the hills, no sound but the flags flapping on the grounds below. Seemed like if she stared hard and long and far enough, she might catch a glimpse of him somewhere out there.

"You're missing your husband."

Wiped her eyes. "Did you leave anyone behind when you left Arches?"

Ed shook his head.

“That must make things a little easier. Only having to worry about yourself, I mean.”

“I was married once. I’ve been thinking about her. You know, wondering.”

“Any kids?”

“Haven’t been in touch with them in a long time.” He looked at her as if he might offer some further explanation, then moved on to something else instead. “I’m concerned the Canadian border is going to be tough to cross. I’ve been considering other possibilities.”

“Like what?”

“We’re only a few hours south of Bozeman. That’s the nearest airport. Maybe we get our hands on a plane.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“Used to fly commercial jets.”

“How long since you’ve been in a cockpit?”

“You really want to know?”

“Can you still fly? I mean, doesn’t the technology change?”

“We’d just be looking for a twin-prop. Nothing too complicated. We could be in Canada in under two hours.”

Dee slept through the rest of the afternoon, and in

the evening, she took Naomi and Cole down to the observation point. When it finally blew, the sunlight shot horizontally through the scalding mist and turned the water into fire.

Ed gassed up the Jeep and added a few quarts of oil, employed Cole to clean the dust and grime off the windows. They set out with the moon high enough to obviate the need for headlights, speeding north through the park to the blues of Muddy Waters.

An hour and a half brought them to the Montana border. They roared across and up through the isolated, nothing towns of Gardiner, Miner, and Emigrant, all vacated, all long-since and so thoroughly burned there wasn't even the temptation to stop and search for food.

A little before midnight, Ed pulled over onto the shoulder.

"We're close to Bozeman," he said, "but if we stay on this road, we're going to have to get on the interstate." He opened the glove compartment, pulled out a map, and unfolded it across the steering wheel.

Dee leaned over and touched a light gray line that branched off from the bold one denoting the highway they'd been driving all night.

"Here?" she said.

“Yeah, that’s the one we need to find. See how it cuts right across? Once we hit it, we’re only twenty miles from the Bozeman airfield.”

Dee spotted it as they raced past and Ed turned around in the empty highway and headed back. It was an unmarked dirt road that exploited the Jeep’s decrepit shocks, rocking them along for several miles on a gentle climb through pine forest. Just dark enough when passing through the corridors of trees to persuade Ed to punch on the headlights.

“Could we actually fly out tonight?” Dee said.

“Assuming we find a plane with sufficient fuel, I’ll probably want to wait until first light. Really don’t want my first flight in over two decades to be by instrumentation.”

“Can I help fly?” Cole asked.

“Absolutely, copilot.”

Dee stared out the window at the open field they moved across, thinking how flying out of all this madness, of finally getting her kids someplace safe, felt so far beyond the realm of possibility she couldn’t even imagine it happening.

Ed slammed the brake.

She shot forward, painfully restrained by the seatbelt.

Looked up when she'd recoiled back into the leather seat, her first thought her children who were picking themselves up out of the backseat floorboards, and her second the numerous points of light that were moving toward the Jeep.

"Back up, Ed. Back up right—"

The windshield splintered and something warm sprayed the side of Dee's face as Ed fell into the steering wheel, the horn blaring, other rounds piercing the glass, the night filling with gunshots. Dee unbuckled her seatbelt and shoved the gearshift into park and crawled over the console into the backseat. Sprawled herself on top of Naomi and Cole as bullets struck the car.

"Is he dead?" Naomi asked.

"Yes."

The firing stopped.

"Either of you hit?"

"No."

"Make it stop," Cole cried.

"Are you hit, Cole?"

He shook his head.

Footsteps approached the Jeep, and in the illumination of an oncoming flashlight, Dee could see clear liquid sheeting down the glass of the rear passenger window.

“We have to get out of the car,” she whispered.

Already her eyes were burning, the fumes getting stronger.

“They’ll shoot us if we get out,” Naomi said.

“They’ll burn us alive if we stay in. They’ve shot some of the plastic gas cans on top of the Jeep.”

Dee opened the door and tumbled out. The glare of the flashlights maxed her retinas and she could see little of who was there nor determine their number amid the afterimages that pulsed purple in the dark.

“Stop right there.” A man’s voice. Dee stood and raised her hands.

“Please. I have two children with me. Naomi, Cole, get out.” She felt one of them, probably Cole, glom onto her right arm.

“They’re like me,” Cole said.

“What are you talking about?”

“They have light around their head. All of them.”

“Get back in your car,” the man said, close enough now for Dee to get a decent look—three-day beard, dark navy trousers and parka, aiming an automatic weapon at her face.

He motioned toward the car with the machinegun as others emerged out of the dark behind him.

Dee considered the Glock pushed down the back of her pants. Suicide.



“Bill, check the driver.”

A short, stocky soldier put a light through Ed’s window.

“Gone to be with the Lord, boss.”

“Got your Zippo on you, you chain-smoking motherfucker?”

“Yeah.”

“Particularly attached to it?”

“It was my older brother’s.”

“Cough that shit up.”

“Fuck, Max.”

The lightbeam glimmered off the steel as the soldier chucked his lighter to the man who held Dee and her children at gunpoint, Max catching it with his left hand, never letting the AR-15 waver in his right.

“What are you doing with *them*, little man?”

“Do not speak to my son.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

“You know exactly what I mean. Don’t you want to come with us?”

“Why don’t you leave us alone? We aren’t doing anything to you.”

Max looked up at Dee with unfiltered hatred. “Get back in the car.”

“No.”

“Get in the car or I’ll shoot you and your children in the knees and put you in there myself. You can roast healthy or you can roast with shattered kneecaps. It makes not a fucking bit of difference to me so long as I get to watch you burn.”

Dee said, “What did we ever. . .”

Max aimed the AR-15 at her left knee.

Split second choice. Reach for the Glock or speak one last time to your children.

“I love you, Naomi. I love you, Cole. No one and nothing can take that away.”

“I can,” Max said.

She drew her kids into her, Naomi quaking and crying, but she didn’t allow herself to avert her eyes from the man who was going to murder them. She stared Max down, wondering would he think of them years from now on his deathbed in a moment of clarity and regret, wondering if her eyes would always haunt him, but she doubted it as he returned the stare, a malevolent smile curling his lips, Dee’s heart in her throat.

The slug mostly decapitated Bill.

A shotgun thundered out of the woods, Max spinning toward the gunfire, several of his men falling, flashlights hitting the ground, muzzleflames spitting out of the machineguns. Dee jerked Naomi and Cole to

the ground and dragged them crawling away from the Jeep toward the other side of the road, where they rolled into a ditch.

Smell of moist, rich earth. The gunfire intensifying, bullets striking the trees behind them, Dee pushing Naomi's and Cole's heads down, pulling Cole into her chest and speaking into his ear over the shattering noise of the firefight, "I'm right here, I've got you." She couldn't hear him crying but she could feel his body shaking.

After what seemed ages, the flurry of gunfire dissipated.

They lay in the dark, Dee staring into a wall of dirt.

Someone yelled, "Fall back."

Footsteps crunched through the leaves—someone retreating into the woods.

A man groaned nearby, begging for help.

Three reports from a handgun.

An AR-15 answered.

The exchange went on for several minutes, and it struck Dee that the gunfire sounded like the communication of terrible birds. She was tempted to climb out of the ditch and have a look, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

After a while, the shooting stopped altogether.

Footfalls echoed through the forest.

The man nearby pleaded to God.

Someone said, "Jim, right there."

A machinegun ripped up the silence.

Four shotgun blasts roared back.

Footsteps moved closer to the ditch.

"Sure we got all of them?"

A woman answered, "Yeah, there were nine. I count one, two, three, four, five six. . ." She laughed. "Where do you think you're going?" A single handgun report rang out. "And this one's still hanging in there, too."

"No, Liz."

"Why?"

"Please, it hurts so bad."

"You're breaking my fucking heart. Why can't I end this piece of shit?"

"Mathias wanted one alive."

"Kay. Driver's dead, but I saw three others get out. Woman, couple of kids."

"They crawled into the woods when the shooting started. May be gone by now."

Footsteps moved across the dirt road and stopped at the edge of the ditch.

The woman yelled into the woods, "Woman and two kids? You out there? We're the good guys, and the bad guys are dead or wishing they were."

Dee didn't move, not wanting to startle anyone, just

said softly, "We're right here. Underneath you."

The woman knelt down. "Anyone hurt?"

"No." Dee pushed herself out of the dirt and sat up.

"Thank you. They were going to burn us."

"You're safe now." The woman reached out, took hold of Dee's hand. "I'm Liz."

"Dee."

"And who's this?"

"This is Cole, and this is Naomi."

"Hi, Cole. Hi, Naomi."

Liz wore a dark, one-piece jumpsuit. Long black hair drawn back into a ponytail under her black beanie. Even squatting down, Dee could see that she was tall and fit, possessing a hard, wiry strength evident in the angular tapering of her jawline.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Liz said. "You want to come with us?"

"Where to?"

Liz smiled. "It's not far."

Dee held Cole's and Naomi's hands as they followed Liz and the others back through the woods, guided by flashlights. Two of their party lagged behind, dragging the injured soldier who they could hear groaning some distance back through the trees, Dee feeling the ache, despite everything, to attend to

him. A deep-rooted hardwiring from her medical training that she wondered if she would ever lose.

A quarter mile into the woods, they stopped.

Someone said, "We're at the perimeter."

A voice squeaked back over a radio. "You're clear."

"We picked up a woman and two children. I'm going to have Liz put them in number fourteen. Have someone bring some food and water over. New clothes, too."

"Copy that."

Dee noticed light glinting off coils of razorwire straight ahead.

One of the men stepped on the wire where it sagged, made an opening for everyone to crawl through. They went on, and after another fifty feet, finally emerged from the woods. Under the moonlight, Dee could see a number of smaller buildings scattered through the clearing, satellites of a large, arched steel building.

Liz fell back and walked with them.

"You must be exhausted," she said. "We're going to put you up in a cabin. I want you to know that you're safe here. See those?" She pointed toward opposing ends of the clearing where twenty-foot log towers stood near the edge of the forest. "There's a heavily-armed man in each wearing night vision goggles.

They'll be watching over the clearing while you sleep."

They were moving toward a grouping of small cabins now.

"I don't understand. What is this place?" Dee asked.

"It's our home."

The cabin was clean and smaller than the shacks at the top of Togwotee Pass. There were two beds and a chair pushed under a desk and a chest of drawers. Sink and shower.

"We cut the generators off at night," Liz said. She opened the top drawer and took out several candles and a box of matches. In a minute, candlelight warmed the room.

She came over to Dee and inspected her face.

"You're covered in blood. I'll make sure they bring a basin of water so you can clean up. The showers won't run hot until morning."

"Thank you, Liz."

"I'll leave you guys now. Food should be here soon."

Dee stripped to her bra and panties, suddenly aware of how terrible she smelled. She bent down and dipped her face into the basin of water and wiped off the dried blood with a washcloth. Scrubbed her

armpits, did a cursory cleaning of her arms and legs, but her hair still felt stringy and greasy.

Cole slept. Dee and Naomi sat on the other bed devouring the food that had been brought for them—a tray of fruit and cheese and crackers that tasted better than anything they'd ever eaten.

Dee stowed the Glock under the mattress. They crawled under the covers and it took some time before their body heat warmed the air between the mattress and the sheet, Dee spooning her daughter, sleep right around the corner.

Naomi whispered, "Do you think Dad's dead?"

Felt like someone driving a spike through the ulcer in Dee's stomach.

Tomorrow would be four days without him.

"I don't know, Na."

"Well, does it feel to you like he is?"

"I don't know, baby. I can't even think about it. Please just let me sleep."

\* \* \* \* \*

SHE'D just fallen asleep when the windows filled with dawnlight. Dee rose, pulled the curtains, climbed back into bed. Tried to sleep but her thoughts came frenetic and unstoppable. She got up again and went



to the window and peered through the split in the curtain. A few people were out already, the long grass blanched with frost, and in daylight, the meadow appeared cluttered—two dozen one-room cabins like the one they occupied, three larger A-frames, the central steel building, and a number of semi-trailers standing along the edge of the woods, rusted all to hell and cemented with pine needles as if it had been centuries since their abandonment. Distant mountains peeked above the pine trees, and Dee sat on the surface of the desk watching the light color them in, and she was still sitting there two and a half hours later when the woman named Liz walked up the path to their cabin.

The main building was fifty feet wide, twice as long, and windowless. Bare lightbulbs dangled from the trusses and the amalgamation of voices caused a hollow, metallic resonance off the corrugated steel. Cheap folding tables had been pushed against the walls, leaving a wide row down the middle. Just inside the entrance, a chalkboard stand displayed: Hash Browns with Bacon & Cheese Omelet.

Liz led them to an empty table.

“We haven’t been able to get into town for several weeks, so we’ve been dipping into our MRE stash.”

“What’s an MRE?” Cole asked.

“Stands for Meal, Ready-to-Eat. It’s an army ration. We bought two truckloads last year.”

Dee could feel the stares coming from every direction, tried to focus on the blemishes in the plastic tabletop, ignoring that twinge in her gut like the first day of junior high and the minefield of the cafeteria.

A teenage girl appeared at the end of the table holding a basket filled with small, brown packages, plastic silverware, and a stack of tin bowls.

“Welcome,” she said.

The man who spoke after breakfast was slight and smoothshaven with thinning blond hair on the brink of turning white. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt and a black down vest. He stood on a table at the back of the mess hall so everyone could see him.

“No doubt you all heard the gunshots late last night. I’m happy to report that Liz and Mike and their team managed to take out the soldiers’ checkpoint at the road.”

Raucous applause broke out.

Someone yelled, “Freemen.”

Silence returned when he lifted his hand.

“No casualties on our end, and the really good news is that we took one alive. Badly wounded, but

alive. Liz and Mike also managed to save three lives during the ambush.” He pointed back toward the entrance. “Dee, would you and your children stand up please.”

Dee took Cole’s hand and poked Naomi and they all rose.

“Thank you,” Dee said. She glanced down at Liz. “To you. To Mike, wherever you are, and all of the others who came. My children and I would be dead right now if it wasn’t for you. There’s not a doubt in my mind.”

“Why don’t you come on up here,” the man said.

Dee stepped around her chair and walked down the aisle. When she arrived at the table the man was standing upon, he reached down and opened his hand and pulled her up with him. Slipped his arm around her waist, put his lips to her ear, whispered, “Dee, I’m Mathias Canner. Introduce yourself. Tell us about your journey.”

She looked out over the crowd—fifty, maybe sixty faces staring back at her.

Managed a weak smile.

“I’m Dee,” she said. “Dee Colclough.”

Someone in the back yelled, “Can’t hear you.”

Later, she walked with Mathias. It was midmorning

and the sun had cleared the forest wall. The dewy grass drying out. He showed her the well, the greenhouse and chicken coop, the gardens which had already been winterkilled.

"I bought this ninety-acre parcel twelve years ago," he said. "Sold my business and moved out with several friends from Boise. Something, isn't it?"

"What exactly brought you out here?"

"Wanting to live as a free man."

"You weren't free before?"

He waved to the bearded man up in the guard tower holding a sniper rifle. "Morning, Roger."

"Morning."

"All quiet?"

"All quiet."

As Mathias led Dee into the trees, his right hand unsnapped the holster for the huge revolver at his side.

"Roger came to me nine years ago. He was an investment banker pulling down three mil a year and utterly miserable. The electrified razorwire starts fifty feet in and runs through the woods around the entire clearing. We've installed motion detectors at key points and six men walk the perimeter day and night. If I learn that you're a spy or that you've lied to me in any way, I'll kill your children in front of you, wait a day,

and then kill you.”

He stopped and stared at her.

She could hear the hum of the fence behind them, and standing in a patch of light, see the color in his eyes—brown with sunlit flecks of green. Her kneecaps trembled, and for a moment, she thought she might have to sit down.

“I’m just a doctor from Albuquerque,” she said. “Trying to keep my kids safe. Everything I’ve told you is true.”

They walked again.

“Ten days ago, we sent someone out on reconnaissance.”

“They haven’t come back?”

He shook his head. “What’s it like out there?”

“A nightmare. You can’t tell who’s affected until they try to kill you.”

“They aren’t just military?”

“No. They group together and travel in convoys. They recognize the unaffected on sight. I couldn’t tell you how many towns we passed through that have been burned to the ground.”

“We had to put five of our own down a few weeks ago. They killed three people before we stopped them. Is it a virus? Do you know what’s causing it?”

“No,” she said. “It all imploded so fast.”

They crossed over a road—just the faintest depression of tire tracks in the leaves.

“You have vehicles?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She caught movement up ahead—one of the guards cruising the perimeter.

“Two of our women are pregnant. We don’t have a doctor.”

“I’d be happy to see them.”

They veered back out of the woods into the clearing, moved past a group of children standing in the grass, each with their own easel.

“We’re really proud of our school here,” he said. “Naomi and Cole are welcome to attend, of course.”

In the afternoon, Dee examined two women with child and checked in on a fifteen-year-old boy with a low-grade fever and rickety cough, just relieved to engage her mind in her old life, if only for a short while.

“I don’t like this place,” Naomi said. “These people creep me out.”

Dee lay in bed in their cabin under the covers with Cole and Naomi, the boy already asleep.

“Would you agree it’s an improvement on starving

to death?”

“I guess.”

Cold air slipped in through the windowframe, just a hint of color in the sky and the tops of the spruce trees profiled against it.

“We staying?” Naomi asked.

“For a few days at least. Get our strength up.”

“Is this like, a militia?”

“I think it might be.”

“So they probably believe all kinds of crazy shit about the government and black people?”

“I don’t know, haven’t asked them, don’t plan to.”

“I’d rather just go to Canada.”

“Could we take it a day at a time for now? At least while they’re still feeding us?”

The knock came in the middle of the night.

Dee stirred from sleep and sat upright and looked around. Not a single source of manmade light, and because she’d extinguished the candle before settling into bed, the room was absolutely dark. She couldn’t recall the layout of her surroundings or even where she was until Mathias Canner’s voice passed through the door.

“Dee. Get up.”

She climbed over Cole, her bare feet touching the

freezing floorboards.

Moved through pure darkness toward Canner's voice.

No locks on the inside of the door, which she pulled open by the wooden handle.

"Sorry to wake you," Mathias said through the inch of open space between the doorframe and the door. "But you're a doctor." He grinned, and in the starlight, she noticed a dark smear across the left side of his face. "Sometimes you get paged in the wee hours, right?"

"Not often. I have a general practice."

"Well, terribly sorry to inconvenience you, but we require the services of an MD."

"What happened?"

"Just get dressed. I'll be waiting right here."

She followed him through the field, the stars blazing over them in the moonless dark. Arrived at the edge of the woods at a small concrete building half-buried in the ground, which at first blush, reminded Dee of a storm cellar.

Mathias led her down a set of stairs to a steel door.

She hesitated on the last step. "What are we doing?"

"You'll see."



"I don't like this."

"Do you think the food and the water and the shelter we're providing to you and your children have no cost?" He pushed open the door and a waft of blood and shit and scorched tissue washed over Dee and conjured the memory of her ER rotation. She looked away from it and braced herself and looked again.

The man, or what was left of him, lay toppled over on the stone floor, naked and manacled to one of the metal folding chairs from the mess hall. He was unconscious in a puddle of blood that appeared as black as motor oil in the candlelight.

Liz sat in another folding chair looking sweaty and happy. She held an iron rod across her lap, one half-inch wide and wrapped at one end with a bulge of duct tape, the finger-grip indentations clearly visible. A blanket had been spread out on the floor beside Liz and upon it lay knives, a drill, a bucket filled with ice water, and a small blowtorch.

"Why are you doing this to him?" Dee asked and the disgust must have bled through her voice because Liz answered,

"This is the man who was on the verge of burning you and your children before we showed up."

"I know who he is."

"We're collecting information," Mathias said and

closed the door. “Unfortunately, he lost consciousness after Liz hit him a few minutes ago.”

Dee stared at Liz. “Where’d you hit him?”

“Right arm.”

“Would you examine him please, Doctor?” Mathias asked.

Dee approached the man named Max, squatting down at the edge of the pool of his blood which was still creeping, millimeter by millimeter, across the stone. She touched two fingers to his wrist, felt the weak shudder of his radial artery. Inspected the mottled bruise that was expanding imperceptibly over the broken bone beneath his right bicep like a cancerous rainbow—red, yellow, blue, then ringed with black. His abdomen was hot and swollen around a bullethole in his side which she guessed had nicked his liver.

“She didn’t kill him, did she?” Mathias said.

“Not quite, but she did break the humerus of his right arm. He probably lost consciousness from the pain.” She noticed Max’s legs, fighting back the rise of bile in her throat as she said, “If you burn him anymore he’s going to lose so much fluid he’ll go into shock and die. I mean, he’s going to die of sepsis in the next day or so anyway, no doubt, but keep burning him, and you’ll lose him tonight.”

“Good to know.”

“Was there anything else you needed from me?”

Dee asked, staring at this man who would've murdered her children and yet still cringing for him.

“Max did happen to mention that Cole is affected.”

Dee looked back over her shoulder. “Is that a joke?”

“Max told us that when you pulled up to the checkpoint and got out, he saw a light around Cole's head.”

“That's bullshit.”

“You think?”

“You were torturing him. He'd say anything to—”

“That's possible. In fact, I hope it's the case. But just to be sure, Mike's talking with Cole right now.”

Dee jumped up and started toward the door. As she reached for the handle, something struck her from behind and shoved her up against the cold wall of concrete.

Liz spoke into her ear, “Just settle down, Dee.”

“I'll fucking kill you if you touch—”

“They're only talking,” Mathias said.

“You don't talk to my son without me.” She was trembling with rage.

“Fair enough. Let's join them.”

She walked between Liz and Mathias, the woman clutching Dee's left arm in a solid grip that Dee imagined could be crushing if Liz wanted it to be. There was candlelight glowing in the windows of her cabin now, and if she could have broken free she would have run toward it, her heart bumping harder and harder as they approached.

They followed Mathias up the three steps to the door.

He pushed it open, said, "How we doing?"

Dee jerked her arm out of Liz's grasp and pushed past Mathias into the cabin.

Cole sat on the bed and Mike straddled a chair which he'd spun around in front of the door. Naomi was up, too, sitting against the window, and Dee could see in her daughter's face a measure of real fear.

She climbed onto the bed, pulled her son into her arms.

"You okay, buddy?"

"Yes."

"Naomi?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Everybody's fine, Mom," Mike said, and something in his tone—a note of rehearsed steadiness and authority—and his cleanshaven face and buzzed

blond hair reminded her of everything she hated about lawmen.

“You don’t speak to my son without me.”

Mike seemed to disregard this jurisdictional instruction, glancing instead at Mathias.

“Ask the boy about the lights.”

Mathias looked at Cole. “Go ahead, tell me about —”

“Don’t answer him, Cole. You don’t have to say a word to that man.”

“That’s not exactly true, Dee,” Mathias said. “Do you think I’m incapable of arranging a private conversation with your son? You can answer me, Cole. Cole, no, Jesus. . .it’s okay, don’t get upset. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Cole had turned into Dee’s chest, and she could feel his little body shaking, Cole trying not to cry in front of these strange people.

Mike said, “From what the boy told me, there was some feature in the sky several weeks ago.”

“So he’s confirmed what Max said.”

“Yeah, and apparently the people who witnessed this event became affected shortly thereafter.”

“Did you see the lights, Cole?”

Cole wouldn’t look at him.

“Did the boy see it?”

“Says he did, but that his parents and sister didn’t.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Dee said. “He’s no threat to anyone.”

Mathias stared at Dee. “We stay intentionally out of the loop here. We don’t monitor the news or even the weather. Tell me exactly what this event was.”

Dee kissed the top of Cole’s head and rubbed his back while she spoke. “A massive aurora visible to all of the lower forty-eight, northern Mexico—”

“And you didn’t see it?”

“It wasn’t like the news was going too crazy over it. No more coverage than a large meteor shower. We had wanted to stay up for it, but it happened so late, Jack and I just didn’t manage to drag ourselves out of bed.”

“But your son saw it.”

Her eyes filled up with tears. “Cole slept at a friend’s house and they set their alarm and woke up at three in the morning and watched it.”

Mathias smiled. “You lied to me.”

“I was afraid you’d—”

“You’ve brought someone who’s affected into our community.”

“My son is not affected.”

“So you say. But Cole has admitted to seeing the lights. Max saw the light around his head yesterday

night. How exactly is he not affected?"

"I'm his mother. I know my son. He hasn't changed at all. He isn't hostile."

"You'll understand, me being responsible for the safety of the sixty-seven souls who live in this field, if I don't just take your word on that."

"Then we'll leave," she said.

"I wish it were that easy."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know the location of our compound. You've had a tour of our security measures. Do you honestly believe I would allow you to go back out into that war zone with this information?"

"You can't stop us from leaving if we want to."

"Dee." Mathias moved forward, eased down onto the bed. Ran his hand along her shinbone until his fingers closed gently around her ankle. "I wrote the constitution we abide by. I invented our civil and criminal codes of law. I am God here."

He released her leg and glanced over his shoulder at Mike.

Back to Dee.

"I think at this point, it would benefit all concerned for you and I to step outside and have a private conversation."

"You go to hell."

He lowered his voice. "Think about your children, Dee." Whispering now: "If you get upset, it's only going to make them more afraid."

Mike's radio squeaked.

"Mike, come back."

Mike unclipped the radio from his belt and lifted the receiver to his mouth.

"Can this wait, Bruce? Little tied up at the moment."

"The sensors are returning multiple echoes."

"Look, I don't mean to be critical, since I know this is a new assignment for you, but sometimes a herd of elk or deer will pass through."

"No, it's not that."

"How do you know?"

"We've had a current interruption in the razorwire."

"You're telling me someone's cut through?"

"I think so, because now. . ." His voice trailed off.

Mike said, "Bruce, repeat. You broke up."

"I'm wearing night vision goggles and staring south toward the woods. . .definitely picking up a lot of movement in the trees."

"How many?"

"Can't tell."

"Soldiers?"

"I don't know. They're crawling along the ground."

Mathias stood and grabbed the radio from Mike.



“Bruce, we’re coming. Put the word out on channel eight and get people into position right now. Just like we’ve drilled. If you get a shot, start taking them out.”

“Copy that.”

Mathias handed the radio back to Mike and started for the door. “Liz, stand guard outside. If they try to leave, shoot them.”

Dee brought the lit candle over from the dresser and down with her and Cole onto the floor.

“Come on Naomi, I don’t want you near the window.”

Her daughter climbed off the bed, said, “We’re going to be killed if we stay in here.”

Dee crawled over to Naomi’s bed and lifted the mattress.

“Still there?” Naomi whispered.

“Yeah.”

Dee took the gun and eased the mattress back down. She ejected the magazine—still fully loaded—then coughed to cover the metallic clatter as she popped the magazine home and jacked a round.

“Both of you, get dressed quickly,” she whispered. “Put on every piece of clothing they gave you.” Dee went to the closet and tugged the three black parkas off the hangers, handed Naomi and Cole theirs, slid

into hers.

Then she knelt between them, Cole struggling with the laces of the hiking boots they'd given him which were a size too big.

"Take Cole over there and crouch down with him behind the mattress until I come back for you."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Two minutes tops."

Dee approached the door, tried to steady the Glock in her hand.

Glanced back at her children hiding behind the bed, could see only a bit of Naomi's hair.

She spoke through the door, "Liz? You out there?"

No answer.

Dee slid the Glock into the front pocket of her parka and pulled the door open.

Whispered, "Liz?"

The woman squatted ten feet away, watching the far woods with her back to the door. Dee would have shot her then but she had no faith in her aim.

"Liz?"

The woman looked back. "He told you to stay inside."

"I need to talk to you."

Liz stood and started back toward the cabin. A machinepistol dangled from a strap around her neck.

Her right hand held it trained on Dee. She drew in deep lungfuls of air though it wasn't sufficient oxygen to fuel the raging pump of her heart.

Liz stopped at the foot of the steps, two feet below her. "What?"

Dee breathless, lightheaded.

"Isn't there a safer place you can put us?"

"Mathias wants you here, so you stay here. Now go back inside or I'll fuck you up a little."

Dee wasn't sure if Liz would even notice in the starlight, but she suddenly diverted her eyes toward the woods, let her brow scrunch into a subtle furrow. In the time it took Liz to glance back at whatever she thought Dee had seen, Dee drew the Glock from the parka pocket, had it waiting when Liz looked back, aimed down at her face.

Liz's eyes went wide and she said, "Cunt."

Dee pulled the trigger.

Liz dropped like she'd been poured out of a glass. Dee stood frozen, staring down at her, awestruck. How short the distance from life and thought to a sprawled shell in the grass. Knew she could have stood there all night trying to wrap her head around it and been no closer at sunrise. No closer forty years from now, or whenever the end of her days might come.

A spark flared across the field in the trees, the report right on its heels. Other muzzleflashes erupting in the forest like lightning bugs and the night filling with gunshots and men yelling.

She hurried back into the cabin, found her children still hiding behind the bed just like she'd told them.

“Time to leave, guys.”

Movement everywhere—shadows running through the dark and voices broken by sporadic shots. As she led her children around the side of the cabin, a distant burst of machinegun fire shredded the front door.

“Stay with me,” she said, grabbing Cole's hand and pulling him toward the woods. Naomi ran alongside them. Fifty yards to cover and they were passing people in pajamas who'd just stumbled groggy-eyed out of their shacks, some loading rifles or shotguns.

They reached the woods and Dee dragged Naomi and Cole down into the leaves.

From where she lay, it looked like chaos.

Clusters of gunfire blazing back and forth.

Muzzleflashes in the guard towers.

No apparent order.

Just people trying to kill each other and not be killed themselves.

“You guys ready?”

“Where are we going?” Naomi asked.

Dee stood. “Just come on.” She put the Glock in her parka. “Give me your hands.”

They jogged through the woods.

Somewhere in the clearing, a woman screamed.

“Why did they just yell like that?” Cole asked.

“It doesn’t matter. We have to keep running.”

They worked their way through the trees and around the clearing as the firefight intensified.

A hail of bullets eviscerated a spruce tree three steps ahead.

Dee forced her children to the ground and lay on top of them.

“Anybody hit?”

“No.”

“No.”

“There’s a hole just ahead. Crawl into it. Go. Now.”

They scabbled the last few feet through the leaves and then rolled down an embankment. With starlight barely straggling through the crowns of the trees, it was almost pitch-black in their hole, which was really more of a depression, two feet below the forest floor and just spacious enough to accommodate the three of them. Dee sweated under her clothes from the exertion, but as her heart began to slow, she knew the chill would come. She pulled her children into her and

shoveled as many leaves as she could on top of them.

“We have to be quiet now,” she said.

“For how long?” Cole asked.

“Until the shooting stops.”

It went on all night, broken occasionally by spates of silence. Sometimes, there were footfalls in the leaves nearby, and once Dee glimpsed two shadows run past the edge of their depression.

Just before dawn, the shooting stopped. After a while, a chorus of weeping and pleading started up, rising toward a crescendo that was promptly smothered under twenty-five shots that rang out in tandem from what sounded like a pair of small-caliber handguns.

\* \* \* \* \*

BY dawn, an eerie silence had settled over the clearing and the woods. The sky was lightening through the trees, and though her children snored quietly, Dee hadn't slept all night. Carefully, she withdrew her arms from under Cole's and Naomi's necks and turned over in the frosted leaves and crawled up to the lip of the embankment.

Gunsmoke hovered over the clearing like a dirty

mist. From ten yards back in the trees, she had a decent view of the soldiers. Counted at least twenty of them milling around in the grass, sometimes squatting down to confirm the dead were really dead.

There were bodies everywhere in the clearing, and over by the mess hall, two dozen or more lay toppled in a row—women and children.

She backed down into the hole.

Naomi stirred. Her eyes opened. Dee brought her finger to her lips.

They didn't venture out of the hole. Kept hidden instead down in the leaves, listening and sometimes watching the soldiers in the clearing. At midday, a commotion pulled Dee back up to the forest floor. She saw Mathias running through the field, chased by a group of soldiers, one of whom stopped, drew a sidearm, and sighted him up.

Mathias fell concurrently with the pistol report, cried out, and amid the fading echoes of the gunshot, Dee could hear the soldiers laughing.

Someone said, "Nice shot, Jed."

She watched them approach, others coming over now. Surrounding Mathias at the back of a little cabin, fifty or sixty yards away.

"What hole did this rat crawl out of?"

“There’s a trapdoor in the ground back there, camouflaged with grass.”

“Anyone else in there?”

“Just big enough for him.”

Mathias was still crying, and someone said, “You’re only shot in the ass. Shut the fuck up until we give you something to cry about.”

And they did. All afternoon and into the evening, they did. The screams of Mathias blaring through the woods in between bouts of what Dee could only hope was unconsciousness. She didn’t trust Cole’s curiosity, so she held the boy to her chest and covered his ears herself, part of her dying to know what was happening out there, figuring her imagination had invented something infinitely worse than the truth. The other part trying to force her thoughts elsewhere—to a memory or a fantasy—but when the raw and blistering screech of human agony filled the clearing, there was no way to avert her mind from it or to keep from attempting to picture what they must be doing to him.

As darkness fell, light flickered off the trees above them and streamers of sweet smoke drifted into the woods. For three minutes, Mathias screamed louder



than he had all day, and then at last, went silent.

Cole and Naomi became still, and soon they were both murmuring softly in their sleep. Dee turned over onto her stomach, the stiffness in her joints excruciating after nearly twenty hours in this hole.

She crawled up the embankment and peered out past the trees.

A bonfire raged in the middle of the clearing and some of the men had gathered around it, their faces aglow, while others carried the pieces of the cabin they were using for firewood over to what she now realized was a pyre.

Mathias had been hoisted up in the middle of the blaze. Even from sixty yards away, she could see that the crossbeams which held him were still standing and that in fact her imagination had failed to concoct anything as remotely evil as what they had actually done to the man.

The soldiers' laughter sounded alcohol-infused.

Somewhere out there, a woman wept.

Dee eased back down into the depression and roused her children.

They crept all the way back to the razorwire, which no longer hummed, and followed it through the trees. The fire was roaring now, shooting flames thirty feet

high. From Dee's vantage, she could see one of the soldiers running naked through the grass carrying a burning branch, which he delivered onto the front porch of a cabin.

The soldiers hooted their approval, assembling to watch as the flames licked out along the sides and the roof like molten fingers. Then the voices started up from inside.

"Keep running, guys," Dee said, "and don't listen."

She could hear the people beating on the inside of the door and pleading to be let out, the soldiers talking back, taunting them. What welled up inside of Dee nearly drove her out into that clearing. Maybe she'd only kill one or two of them before they stopped her, but God, in this moment, nothing would feel so right.

"Mom, look."

Naomi had stopped just ahead at a break in the fence where the soldiers had come through the night before, the razorwire severed and pushed back.

"Be careful, Na," Dee said, and she lifted Cole in her arms and followed her daughter between the coils of wire.

When they were through, she set Cole down and they all jogged away from the screaming in the clearing.

Naomi was breathless and crying. She stopped, said, "We have to help them."

"Baby, if there was even a slim chance, we would, but there isn't. We'd end up dead, just like them."

"Are they hurting?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"I can't stand hearing it," Naomi said.

"Come on. We have to keep moving."

In a little while, they came out of the woods onto the road about a hundred yards up from the checkpoint. Dee took the Glock out of her parka and they moved toward the vehicles up ahead.

No light. No movement.

The sound of voices in agony coming through the trees with the distant glow of flames.

A pair of hummers still sat in the road and the dead soldiers, too.

They arrived at Ed's Jeep.

"Tires are still inflated," she said.

Out of the gas cans fastened to the luggage rack, only one had survived the gunfight to hold its contents.

"We taking the Jeep?" Naomi asked.

"If the engine isn't damaged. Why?"

"Ed's still in the driver seat, and he doesn't smell good."

Dee went around the back of the Jeep and stood beside Naomi.

“No, Cole, stay there.”

“Why?”

“You don’t need to see this.”

“What is it?”

“Ed’s dead, Cole. It’s nothing good to see. Just stay right there, please.”

She held her arm over her nose and mouth, could only imagine what the potency might have been in warm temperatures.

Ed had swollen up against the steering column, his head resting on the wheel. Dee grabbed hold of his left arm. Rigor mortis had come and gone, and it bent easily as she heaved Ed out of the car. Finally got him free and he tumbled out of the driver seat onto the dirt road, his legs still caught up in the floorboard.

“Give me a hand here, Na, but don’t look at his face.”

They dragged him the rest of the way out of the car and off the side of the road into the trees. Dee found a couple of extra shirts in the cargo area and she spread them across the driver seat to cover the sticky, rotting blood.

There was no more screaming in the woods.

“It still smells bad,” Naomi said.

“We’ll keep the windows down. This cold air will scour it out.”

They grabbed a few candy bars and packages of crackers from the banker’s box. Cole sat in the front passenger seat so Naomi could stretch out across the back, and Dee climbed in and worked the driver seat forward until her feet reached the pedals. Right away, she could see that driving was going to be impossible. Five bullets had come through the windshield into Ed, and around the puncture holes, each of them had made a circle of fractured glass that destroyed the translucence.

Dee got out and climbed up onto the hood and stomped on the windshield. All she managed to do was punch out a hole in front of the steering wheel where the cracks had weakened the glass.

The engine cranked on the first try. She shifted into gear and turned on the parking lights and eased onto the gas. They crept forward, Dee listening to the engine which rumbled smoothly, no audible sign of damage. The oil and temperature gauges offered no indications of malfunction.

She steered between the hummers and dead soldiers and accelerated down the dirt road, wind blasting through the windshield in a freezing stream. The car reeked of gasoline and decay and the bits of

glass she sat upon cutting through her jeans, but at least they were on their own and moving away from the clearing. In this moment, safe.

Fifteen miles on, the dirt road intersected with an interstate. All lanes, east- and westbound, empty under the stars. She accelerated down the exit ramp, hit eighty after a half mile. At this speed, the rush of air coming through the windshield dried her eyes to the brink of blindness, so she braked down to forty.

Her children slept.

In every direction, no glimmer of habitation.

The milemarkers streaking past every couple of minutes.

The long vistas and the straight trajectory of the interstate gave a sense of safety, the security blanket of seeing what was coming long before you reached it, no hairpin turns, but it didn't last.

Just shy of midnight, she turned north onto Highway 89.

Got twenty miles up the road and through a ghost town of charred houses before exhaustion forced her off the highway at a reservoir.

Killed the engine, left the kids to sleep—Cole curled up in the front passenger seat, Naomi in back. She popped the cargo hatch and dug out Ed's

sleeping bag and the roadmap, leaving the hatch open to air out the interior.

Dee walked down to the water and unrolled the sleeping bag across the dirt beside the remnants of another camp—candy bar and potato chip wrappers in the grass.

Kicked off her boots, zipped herself in.

She studied the map. By highway, they were roughly two hundred and seventy-five miles from the Canadian border, with one major city to deal with—Great Falls—but she could cut around and actually save time.

She closed the map.

No trees in this open, arid country. Sagebrush everywhere and she could see forever. A range of mountains to the north, the top thousand feet glazed with snow that glowed under the stars and the moon.

Soundless. Windless. The water so still she could see the stars in it.

She eased back into the sleeping bag, said her husband's name. Tears burned down her face. It had been five days without him. She lay there trying to feel if he was gone. From a purely logical standpoint, it seemed impossible that he wasn't, and she certainly felt apart from him. But, for whatever it was worth (and she had to acknowledge maybe nothing and the

probability of self-delusion), she didn't feel his absence. She felt that Jack was still alive, somehow, under the same night sky.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE semitrailer reeked of shit, urine, vomit, body odor, blood, and something even more malignant. Jack leaned back against the metal wall, his left hand throbbing with such intensity he prayed to lose consciousness again. With the rear door closed, it was pitch black inside and Jack could feel his shoulders grazing the shoulders of the people he sat between as the rocking of the trailer jostled them together. The noise was bewildering—the distant big-rig growl of the V12 Detroit Diesel, the closer rumble of the tires underneath him, a baby wailing, a woman crying, a half dozen voices in whispered conversation.

A man sitting across from him against the other side of the trailer, said, "This is for the guy who just got put in here. Where are we?"

"A mountain pass in Wyoming. Not far from Jackson. Do you know where they're taking us?"

"Nobody knows anything."

"How'd you get here?"

"They picked me up two days ago in Denver."



“Did someone die in here?”

“Yeah, that’s what the smell is. They’re toward the front.”

The pressure in Jack’s ears released as they descended the pass. What was left of his ring finger dripped on his pants, and he tucked his hand under his jacket and tried to wrap his undershirt around the open wound, felt a surge of whitehot pain that nearly made him vomit when he touched the jagged phalange of his ring finger.

The baby went on crying for what he guessed was thirty minutes.

He said finally, “Is someone holding that baby?”

“I’m sorry.” A woman’s voice. “I’m trying to calm her —”

“No, I’m not complaining, I just. . .I can’t see anything, and I wanted to make sure someone’s holding her.”

“Someone is.”

No light slipped in anywhere.

They rolled down what felt like a winding road, and after a while the sharp turns diminished.

Someone shoved a plastic jug of water into his hands, said, “One sip,” and Jack didn’t even hesitate to lift it to his mouth and take a swallow.

He passed it on to the person beside him.

“Thank you.” Voice of an older woman.

Every passing moment, he was moving farther away from his family, and the thought of them alone out there, every bit as hungry and thirsty and scared as he was, simply made him want to be back with them or die right now. He tried but he couldn't stop himself from picturing Dee and the kids inside the pipe, beginning to wonder where he was. After a while, when he didn't return, they'd search the construction site, and soon after, start calling his name, their voices traveling into the forest. Calm at first. He could almost hear them and it broke his heart. He hadn't told them where he was going. Hadn't known himself. Maybe they'd walk up to the pass, but there'd be nothing there, certainly not him, and by then, Dee would be getting frantic and Naomi crying. Possibly Cole as well if he grasped the situation. Would they think he'd abandoned them? Wandered into the woods and somehow gotten injured or killed? How long would they keep looking and what would their state of mind be, when finally, they gave up?

Jack opened his eyes. The diesel engine had gone quiet. The baby had stopped crying. His head rested against the bony shoulder of the old woman to his right and he felt her hand on his face, her whisper in

his ear, "This too shall pass. This too shall pass."

He lifted his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"It's okay, I don't mind. You were crying in your sleep."

Jack wiped his eyes.

The rear door shot up and the light of a sunset flooded the semitrailer with a blast of freezing air. Two soldiers stood on the ramp with automatic weapons, and one of them said, "On your feet everybody."

The prisoners began to haul themselves up all around him, and Jack struggled onto his feet as well.

He descended the metal ramp into the grass, lightheaded and unstable.

A soldier at the bottom pointed across the open field, said, "You hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Food's that way."

"Why are we being—"

The soldier rammed his AR-15 into Jack's chest. "Get going."

Jack turned and stumbled along with the crowd, everyone moving through an open field and folding into streams of more people filing out of four other semitrailers—two hundred prisoners by Jack's estimate. They looked haggard and addled and he searched for the old woman whose shoulder he'd

used for a pillow, but he didn't see anyone who met his mind's imagining of her.

Over his shoulder, Jack spotted several buildings, and though impossible to be certain in the lowlight, they appeared to be surrounded by small airplanes and a handful of private jets.

Everywhere, soldiers were directing the prisoners toward a collection of tents a quarter mile away on the far side of the field.

"Hot food and beds," someone yelled. "Keep moving."

Jack looked for the man who'd cut his finger off, but he didn't see him.

They crossed the asphalt of a runway. The tents closer now, and straight ahead, less than fifty yards away, a mountain of dirt and a bulldozer.

Jack smelled food on the breeze.

On ahead, people were stopping near the pile of dirt and he could hear soldiers yelling. They were lining the prisoners up shoulder to shoulder.

A soldier shoved him forward, said, "Stand right there and don't fucking move."

"Why?"

"We have to inspect you."

"For what?"

"Shut the fuck up."

Jack stood in a line of ragged-looking people, some of whom had begun to cry.

The soldiers were backing away, Jack's head swimming with the smell of whatever was cooking across the field.

As he glanced back toward the tents, his eyes caught on the several thousand square feet of raw, freshly-turned earth that he and the other prisoners stood at the edge of.

He looked at the bulldozer again.

By the time he understood what was happening, the two dozen soldiers who'd herded them into the middle of the field were raising their AR-15s.

Someone said, "Oh my God."

Several prisoners took off running, and a soldier squeezed off four controlled bursts. They fell and the prisoners were screaming, others trying to flee, and one of the soldiers yelled and they all opened fire at once.

The noise was tremendous. Slap of bullets into meat. The schizophrenic madness of the machineguns. The screams. All down the line, people were tumbling back into the pit. Maybe two seconds had passed, the muzzleflashes bright in the evening, and the soldiers already edging forward and still firing.

It felt like someone punched him in the shoulder, and then Jack was staring up at the clouds which were catching sunlight on their underbellies, people falling into the pit all around him. Bloodspray everywhere and the smell of shit, urine, and rust becoming prevalent like the sensory embodiment of terror, warm blood leaking all over him, down into his face, appendages writhing all around him. Then the shooting stopped and there came a moment of silence, Jack's ear drums in shock, recovering from the noise, before the sound of a hundred dying people faded in. If Jack had believed in hell, he couldn't have imagined it sounding any worse than this chorus of agony—groans, moaning, weeping, screaming, people dying loudly, quietly, some cursing their murderers, some begging them to do what could not be undone, some just asking why. And the realization slowly dawning on Jack amid the horror—I'm still alive, I'm still alive.

A voice lifted out of the open grave, "Oh God, please finish me."

Jack's shoulder was burning now.

He could see the soldiers standing at the edge of the pit, Jack thinking only of his children as he pulled several bodies over him, and then the machineguns erupted again with a blaze of fire, and he could feel

the bodies that shielded him shaking with the impact of the bullets. Shit himself waiting to be shot, but it never happened.

This time, when the guns went quiet, the groans were half what they had been.

Jack's entire body trembled.

He willed himself to be still.

The soldiers near him were talking.

“—don't serve that meatloaf again. Fucking rancid shit.”

“I love the mac and cheese though. Don't disrespect.”

“Oh, hell yeah. You got a crawler over there.”

Two bursts from the machinegun.

“All right, boys, who drew cleanup?”

The light was abandoning the sky, and there was little in the way of groaning now, just desperate breathing all around him.

“Nathan, Matt, Jones, and Chris.”

“Well fucking get to it, boys, and before you lose your light. We're going to party tonight. God, this is going to be a pretty green piece of grass next spring.”

Jack could hear the soldiers walking away, the sound of distant voices, still some movement in the pit.

As one of the bodies on top of him began to twitch,

a noise rose up at the far end of the pit, followed by another and another, the last one close to where he lay.

He watched as one of the soldiers climbed down into the pit. They held a chainsaw with a three-foot guide bar, wore a white vinyl apron, a helmet with a plexiglass faceplate. He started across the top layer of bodies, slashing at anything that moved.

Jack tried to lay still, ignoring the burn in his shoulder.

The body on top of him sat up, and in the low light, Jack could see her long, black hair falling down her back. She was crying and he reached up to try and pull her down, but the soldier with the chainsaw had already seen her and was wading over through the bodies.

Jack heard her scream just barely and then the soldier swung his giant chainsaw.

She fell back onto Jack and the blood flowed, blinding him, choking him, and he lay there unmoving as the soldier passed by, the noise of the chainsaws growing softer.

Someone yelled, "Jones, look at this guy. Untouched. Didn't even catch a bullet. Keep playing dead, motherfucker."

The two-stroke wailed and there were seconds of



the most horrendous screaming Jack had ever heard, and then the chainsaw motors idled again.

The soldiers wandered through the pit for another ten minutes, and then the chainsaws went quiet and the voices slipped out of range.

Jack didn't move for a long time. The blood that covered him becoming sticky and cold and not another sound daring to lift out of the open grave.

His shoulder throbbing.

The clouds overhead gone dark and the sky almost void of light.

He pushed the headless body off of him and sat up.

Off in the distance toward the tents, a bonfire raged and there were fifty or sixty men gathered around it, their laughter and voices carrying across the field.

Jack crawled onto the surface of the pit, a few people still barely hanging on, groaning as he moved across them, one man begging for his help. The pain in Jack's shoulder making it nearly impossible to set his weight on his right arm, but he finally reached the back edge of the pit and climbed out into the grass.

He kept moving on his stomach across the field through that strange and fleeting grayness between twilight and night. A hundred yards out from the pit, exhaustion stopped him. Still had a fifth of a mile to go to the trees, but he couldn't catch his breath. Lay on

his side watching the bonfire and the soldiers in camp, the reflection of the fire bright off the shine of their black leather boots.

Jack crawled again.

Another twenty minutes before he passed through the wall of trees, stopping ten feet inside the forest. Retching his guts out though there was nothing left but the sip of water he'd had hours ago in the back of the tractor trailer.

He crawled to the nearest spruce tree under an overhang of branches.

On the cusp of pitch-black darkness in the shadow of the forest.

He touched his right shoulder—painful and hot, though not as bad as the last bullet he'd stopped. Couldn't see the wound, but running his hand along the back of his shoulder, he thought he could feel the exit hole—a circular flare of burned skin.

Despite the pain, he felt a detachment from himself so intense it verged on out-of-body, like a filter setting up between what had happened in the field and his emotional connection to it. He felt a beautiful step removed. He watched himself listening to the soldiers. Watched himself lying on his side on the moist ground with his back against the tree trunk. Watched his eyes close as the devastation that was this day sat

perched beside his head with the patience of a gargoyle, waiting to crush him.

At some point in the night, a noise from the field woke him, and it took Jack a moment to connect it with the growl of the dozer. Through the branches of the spruce tree, he could just make out the lights on top of its cab blazing down into the pit, the scoop pushing earth back into the open grave.

He shut his eyes but another sound wouldn't let him sleep—a crunching like the snap of trees during an ice storm, and he'd almost let it go, so tired, so tired, when he realized what it was. It could only be the bones of those inside the pit, breaking under the dozer's weight.

\* \* \* \* \*

JACK woke to stomach cramps and the splintering brightness of the sun coming through the branches. He crawled out from under the spruce tree, lightheaded and sore, wondering how much blood he'd lost during the night.

The exposed bone of his left ring finger hurt more than his shoulder.

The meadow was abuzz with soldiers, many of them closer than he would've liked, and some of them

with dogs.

He struggled to his feet and started into the woods. It was slow-going. He had no sense of direction. Just a dense pine wood that seemed to go on and on.

By midday, he hadn't crossed a road, a water source, or anything resembling civilization, and as the light started to fail the forest began to climb, until in the twilight, he found himself on a steep, wooded hillside. He sat down. Shivering. Nothing left.

\* \* \* \* \*

WOKE colder than he'd ever been in his life and covered in frost, curled up on the mountainside and watching the torturously slow progression of sunlight climbing the hill toward the spot where he lay.

When the sun finally washed over him two hours later, he shut his eyes and faced its brightness, let the warmth envelop him. He stopped shivering. The frost had burned off his clothing. He sat up and looked up the hillside and started to climb.

Somehow, he went on. Hands and knees. Mindless hours. Always up. Endless.

Late afternoon, he lay on a hillside covered in

aspen trees. If someone had told him he'd been climbing this mountain for a year, he might've believed them. He was losing control of his thoughts. The thirst fracturing his mind. It occurred to him that if he didn't get up and start walking in the next ten seconds, he wasn't going to get up again. Could feel himself on the edge of not caring.

In the middle of the night, he stumbled out of the forest into a clearing that swept another thousand feet up the mountain to his left, and shot down a narrow chute between the spruce trees to his right. The sky was clear, the moon high, everything bright as day. A golf course, he thought. A steep golf course. Then he noticed the tiny lodge halfway up the hill. The metal terminals that went up the mountain and the cables strung between them. He stared downslope, saw a sign with a black diamond next to the word, "Emigrant."

Jack's legs buckled.

Then he lay with the side of his face in the cold, dead grass, staring down the steep headwall. He could see three mountain ranges from his vantage point, the rock and the pockets of snow above timberline glowing under the moon.

He closed his eyes, kept telling himself he should

get up, keep walking, crawling, roll down this fucking mountain if he had to, because stopping was death, and death meant never seeing them again.

Saying her name aloud tied a hot wire of pain around his throat, which felt full of glass shards. So dry and swollen. He said the name of his daughter. The name of his son. He pushed himself up. Sat there dry-heaving for a minute. Then he got onto his feet and started down the mountain.

Jack was a dead man walking two hours later, a thousand feet lower, when he arrived at the foot of the dark lodge. He had to crawl up the steps and pull himself upright again by the wooden door handles. They were locked. He went back down the steps and pried one of the rocks lining the sidewalk out of the ground.

So weak, it took him four swings to even put a crack through the big square window beside the doors. The fifth swing broke through and the glass fell out of the frame. He scrambled over into a cafeteria, perfectly dark except for where moonlight streamed through the tall windows. So strange to be indoors again. It had been days. The grill in back was still shuttered for the season. He limped over to the drink fountain, mouth beginning to water. Pressed the

buttons for Coca-Cola, Sierra Mist, Orange Fanta, Country Time Lemonade, Barq's Rootbeer, but the machine stood dormant, empty.

He made his way between the tables toward a common area that accessed a bar and a gift shop, both locked up. He moved out of the long panels of moonlight into darkness.

Straight ahead, he could just make out a pair of doors. As he moved toward them, they vanished in the black, but he kept on, hands outstretched, until he ran into a wall.

He pushed and the door swung back.

Couldn't see a thing, but he knew he was in a bathroom. Smelled the water in the toilets.

He ran his hand along the wall, found the switch, hit the lights.

Nothing.

Heard the door ease shut. He moved forward to where he thought the sinks might be, and stepped into a wall. Turned around, becoming disoriented as he moved in a different direction. He touched a counter, his hands frantically searching for the faucet. Cranked open the tap, but nothing happened.

Took him several minutes to get his trembling hands on the stall door. He pulled it open and dropped to his knees, hands grazing the cold

porcelain of the toilet. Inside the bowl, his fingers slid into chilly water.

He didn't think about where this water had been or all the people who'd sat on this toilet and pissed and shit and vomited here, or the industrial strength chemicals that had been used to clean the bowl. He lowered his face to the surface of the water and drank and thought only of how sweet it tasted running down his swollen throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

A razor line of light. For a long time, Jack just stared at it. His face against a tiled floor. Cold but not freezing. Piecing together where he was, how he'd arrived here, beginning to face the fact that he wasn't dead. At least he was mostly sure he wasn't.

He crawled out of the stall. The raging thirst gone, but the hunger pangs doubled him over when he stood, his feet so badly blistered he was afraid to see the damage.

He wandered toward the paper towel dispenser.

Cranked out a length of paper, tore it off.

Through the dark, and then he pulled open the door, the light like a railroad spike through his temples.

He limped out into the lobby, which looked almost



like civilization in the daylight, sat down and went to work making a bandage for what was left of his ring finger.

He was already pushing open the front doors when he realized what he'd just walked past. Stepped back inside, half-expecting it to have vanished, like a mirage, but there it stood.

He rushed back into the cafeteria to the broken window. Lifted the rock off the floor and brought it into the lobby, where he hurled it through the glass.

He reached through and pulled out everything he could get his hands on—bags of potato chips, candy bars, crackers, cookies—until the vending machine was emptied and its contents spread across the floor.

He ripped into a bag of Doritos.

The chips were stale, leftovers from last season, but the intensity of the flavor made his mouth ache. He sat in the warm sunlight pouring through all the glass around the front entrance. Finished the bag and opened another filled with processed onion rings he would never have ingested in his former life. They were gone in a moment.

He drank his fill of water from the toilet and urinated for the first time in days.

Then grabbed the plastic garbage bag from the trashcan under the sink.

Back in the lobby, he put the two dozen packages of snacks into the bag and slung it over his shoulder.

There was a giant mirror on the wall across from the vending machine. He'd noticed it a little while ago, and now it called to him. The reflection unlike anybody he knew, his face thin as an ax-blade, beard coming in full. He was the color of rust, covered in dried blood, like a zombie-vagrant.

Outside the entrance to the resort, he came across a bicycle rack and a single, abandoned mountain bike standing up between the bars. The tires were low and there was bird shit all over the seat, but it looked otherwise in working order. He climbed aboard and tied his bag of food to the handlebars. He coasted down the sidewalk through the empty parking lot, turned out onto a country road, and then he was speeding along at thirty-five miles per hour down the winding, faded pavement and the cool, piney air blasting his face. The hum of the tires so otherworldly in the face of everything that had come before, like he was out for a bike ride on holiday.

Ten miles on and several thousand feet lower, Jack

braked and brought the bike to a stop. Up ahead, a herd of range cattle was crossing the road, and he watched them pass. He'd ridden down out of the alpine forest and now the foothills of the mountains were bare and the air had become warm and redolent of sage.

He rode on, still cruising east and dropping. The foothills lay a mile behind him now, and the mountains fifteen, and the land was barren and open and the sky immense.

The riding turned strenuous when the grade of the road leveled out, but nothing compared to walking on blistered feet or crawling up a mountain.

In the evening he was twenty miles out from the mountains and turning north onto Highway 89, his quads burning and his face glowing with wind- and sunburn.

A mile and a half up the road, he caught the scent of water on the breeze, thinking he'd grown hypersensitive to the smell as of late, some recent adaptation borne out of nearly dying of thirst.

He crested a small rise and there lay the reservoir, the water like ink under the evening sky and the sun just a chevron of brilliance on the ridgeline of those

mountains he'd ridden out of.

Abandoned the bike on the grassy shoulder and climbed down the slope to the water's edge. Fell to his knees. Drank. It was cold and faintly sweet, none of that metallic, sterilized tang of toilet water.

He ate a supper consisting of a Butterfinger candy bar, two packages of Lays barbeque potato chips, and a Famous Amos chocolate-chip cookie.

Curled up in the grass by the water, already cold, but at least he wasn't hungry or thirsty. He watched the sun go behind the mountains and the stars begin to burn through the growing dark. Reeking of the dried, rotting gore that covered every square inch of his person.

He was crying before he realized it, hot tears running down his face. Alive now, and on track to stay that way for the time being. There were choices to make.

Head south back into Wyoming, maybe meet up with his family on the way. But they'd been separated now almost four days. They might've been picked up or found transportation or come upon some fate he couldn't bring himself to imagine. Would Dee try to find him, or focus on getting Naomi and Cole across the border into Canada?

He took his BlackBerry out of his pocket. The

battery had been dead for weeks.

He held down the power button and typed in Dee's number, held the phone to his ear.

"Hey, baby. I'm at this lake in Montana about thirty miles north of Bozeman. It's beautiful here. So quiet. I'm watching the stars come out. I hope you and the kids are okay. I've had a hard few days."

Out in the middle of the lake, a fish jumped.

"I think I'm going to keep heading north toward Great Falls, our old stomping grounds. I have such sweet memories of that city and you.

"I don't know how to find you, baby, so please stay open and make smart choices. I'm not leaving this country without you, Dee."

The ripples from the middle of the lake were just beginning to reach the shore.

He put his BlackBerry back into his pocket.

The water became still again.

He let his eyes close when they were ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE sound of wind in the grass. Sunshine on his eyelids. It didn't feel cold enough to be first light. He sat up stiff, so sore. An act of willpower just to stand. Late morning, the sun already high. He walked up the

grassy slope into the middle of the highway. The vistas north and south were endless. Nothing going. Nothing coming. Just silence and an overload of open space. The horizons so far, the sky so vast, it seemed right on top of him.

He stripped out of his clothes and ran naked and gasping into the freezing water. Ducked under and swam until he had to surface, ten yards out from the shore. He went back and grabbed his stinking clothes and carried them out into waist deep water, rinsed the blood and filth out of everything, and then used one of his shirts to scrub himself down.

Jack rode north up the highway, soaking wet. Rode hours. Until his clothes had dried out and he had nothing left. Stopped in the early evening, no idea how far he'd ridden, but he hadn't passed a car or a house all day, and the world looked much as it had twenty-four hours prior—empty, big sky country—and he still felt very small in it.

\* \* \* \* \*

TWO miles into his day, coasting down a long, gentle grade in the dawnlight, Jack braked and came

to a stop in the road. He squinted, trying to sharpen his nearsightedness into focus. Couldn't tell how far. A mile. Maybe two. The calculation of distance impossible in this country.

A vehicle parked in the road. One of its doors open.

For ten minutes, Jack didn't move and he didn't take his eyes off the car.

He pedaled up the road, stopping every few hundred yards to view things from a closer vantage.

It was a late model minivan. White. Covered in dust and pockmarked with bulletholes. Some of the windows had been shot out, and there was glass and blood on the pavement. All four tires low but intact. Utah license plate.

Jack stopped ten feet from the rear bumper and got off the bike.

Smell of death everywhere.

Somehow, he had missed the girl in the sagebrush. The sliding door of the minivan was open, and it looked as though she'd been gunned down running, her long blond hair caught up in the branches. He wasn't going to get close enough to see how old she was, but she looked small from where he stood. Ten years old maybe.

A woman sat in the front passenger seat and her brains covered the window at her head. Twin teenage

boys lay slumped against each other in the backseat. The driver seat was empty.

Jack climbed in behind the wheel. The keys dangled out of the ignition. Fuel gauge at a quarter.

He turned the key.

The engine cranked.

He pulled the boys out of the back and their mother out of the front and lined them all up in the desert. Didn't want to, but he couldn't just leave the girl face up, naked and entangled in the sage.

He stood for a long time staring down at them.

Midday and the flies already feasting.

Jack started to say something. Stopped himself. It would've meant nothing, changed nothing, been solely for his benefit. No words to put this right.

He loaded the bicycle into the back.

He drove north, keeping his speed at a steady fifty. A CD in the stereo had been playing the Beach Boys, and Jack let it go on playing until he couldn't stand it anymore.

He passed through a small, burned town, and fifteen miles north, on the outskirts of another, had to



swerve to miss someone walking alone down the middle of the highway.

He stopped the car, watched a man staggering toward him in the rearview mirror, his defective gait unfazed, as if he hadn't even noticed the car that had nearly hit him. He didn't carry a gun or a backpack, nothing in his hands which he held like arthritic claws, his fingers bent and seemingly frozen that way.

Jack shifted into park.

The closer the man got, the more wrecked he looked—sunburned a deep purple, his dirty white oxford shirt streaked in blood and missing one of the arms entirely, his leather clogs disintegrating off his feet.

He walked right past Jack's window and kept on going, straight down the double yellow.

Jack opened the door.

"Hey."

The man didn't look back.

Jack got out and walked after him. "Sir, do you need help?"

No response.

Jack drew even with him, tried to make eye contact, then finally stepped in front of the man, who stopped, his gray eyes staring off at a horizon beyond even the scope of this infinite country.

In another world completely.

“Are you hurt?” Jack said.

His voice must have made some impact, because the man met his eyes, but he didn't speak.

“I have food in the car,” Jack said. “I don't have water, but this road will take us through the Little Belt Mountains. We'll find some in the high country for sure.”

The man just stood there. His entire body trembling slightly. Like there was a cataclysm underway deep in his core.

Jack touched the man's bare arm where the shirt sleeve had been torn away, felt the sun's accumulation of heat radiating from it.

“You should come with me. You'll die out here.”

He escorted the man to the passenger side and installed him in the front seat.

“Sorry about the smell,” Jack said. “It ain't pretty, but it beats walking.”

The man seemed not to notice.

Jack buckled him in and closed the door.

They sped down the abbreviated main street of another slaughtered town. Mountains to the north, and the road climbed into them. Jack glanced over at the man, saw him touching the matter on his window,

running his finger through it, smearing it across the glass. A bag of potato chips and a candy bar sat in his lap, unopened, unacknowledged.

"I'm Jack, by the way," he said. "What's your name?"

The man looked at him as if he either didn't know or couldn't bring himself to say. His wallet bulged out of the side pocket of his slacks, and Jack reached over, tugged it out, flipped it open.

"Donald Massey, of Provo, Utah. Good to meet you, Donald. I'm from Albuquerque."

Donald made no response.

"Aren't you hungry? Here." Jack reached over and took the candy bar out of Donald's lap, ripped open the packaging. He slid the bar into Donald's grasp, but the man just stared at it.

"Do you want to listen to some music?"

Jack turned on the Beach Boys.

They rode up into the mountains, Jack hating to be on a winding road again. With all these blind corners, you could roll up on a roadblock before you knew what hit you.

In the early afternoon, they passed through a mountain village that was probably very much a ghost town before anyone had bothered to burn it. A few

dozen houses. Couple buildings on the main strip. Evergreen trees in the fields and on the hills, the smell of them coming through the dashboard vents, a welcome change.

On the north side of town, Jack pulled over and turned off the engine. When he opened the door, he could hear the running water in the trees and smell its sweetness.

“You need to drink something, Donald,” Jack said. The man just stared through the windshield. Jack lifted a travel mug out of the center console.

Jack rinsed the residue of ancient coffee out of the mug and filled it with water from the creek.

Headed back to the van, opened Donald’s door. “It’s really good,” Jack said.

He held the mug to Donald’s sunblasted lips and tilted. Most of the water ran down the man’s chest under his shirt, but he inadvertently swallowed some of it.

Jack tried to give him a little more, but the man was disinterested.

“We’ll reach Great Falls in the afternoon,” Jack said. “It’s a big city. I used to live there.”

Impossible to know if the man registered a word he was saying.

“I got separated from my family five days ago.” Jack glanced at the man’s left ring finger, saw a gold wedding band. “Were you with your family, Donald?”

No response.

Jack sipped the water, grains of sand from the creekbed deposited on the tip of his tongue.

“Let me guess what you do for a living. My wife and I used to play this game all the time.” Jack studied the man’s leather clogs—nothing much to look at now, but they suggested wealth. Couple hundred dollars off the shelf. Jack inspected the tag on the back of the man’s collar. “Brooks Brothers. All right.” He looked at Donald’s hands. Covered in blood and still clutched like claws, but he could tell they weren’t the hands of a man who earned his living working outdoors. “You strike me as an ad man,” Jack said. “Am I right? You work in an advertising and marketing firm in Provo?”

Nothing.

“I bet you’d never guess my vocation. Tell you what. I’ll give you three. . .”

Jack stopped. Felt the cold premonition of having missed something lifting out of his gut. He almost didn’t want to know, but the fear couldn’t touch his curiosity.

He opened the glove compartment, rifled through a stack of yellow napkins, plastic silverware, bank

deposit envelopes, until he came to the automobile liability policy, protected in a plastic sleeve. He opened it, stared down at the small cards that identified the coverage, the policy limits, and the named insureds.

Donald Walter Massey.

Angela Jacobs-Massey.

Jack looked at Donald.

“Jesus Christ.”

They went on through the mountains, Jack trying to pay attention to what was coming in the distance, but all he could think about was Donald, wondering what had happened back down the road. Couldn't imagine the man fleeing. He wouldn't have left his family. Had the affected purposely left him alive then? Murdered his family in front of him and then sent him down the highway on foot?

Jack blinked the tears out of his eyes.

He looked over at the man who now leaned against the door. That look in his face like he'd just been hollowed out. Jack wanting to tell him that he'd taken care of their bodies, or at least done what he could, shown them respect. He wanted to say something beautiful and profound and comforting, about how even in all this horror, there were things between

people who loved each other that couldn't be touched, that lived through pain, torture, separation, even death. He thought he still believed that. But he didn't say anything. Just reached over and laced his fingers through Donald's, which barely released their incomprehensible store of tension, and Jack held the man's hand as he drove them down out of the mountains, and he did not let go.

In the early evening the city lay several miles in the distance. The sun low over the plains beyond. Everything bright, golden. The way Jack dreamed of this place.

He disengaged his hand from Donald's, the man still sleeping against the door.

The gas gauge needle hovered over the empty slash.

He was debating whether to head into town or take the bypass when he saw the first sign—a billboard that had once advertised a casino, now whitewashed and covered in black writing:

YOU ARE NOW UNDER SNIPER  
SURVEILLANCE  
Stop in the next 400 yards

Jack took his foot off the gas.

Another billboard, same side of the road, one hundred yards further down.

300 yards to stop  
Comply or you will be shot

Jack looked in the rearview mirror, saw several vehicles trailing him, no idea where they'd come from.

200 YARDS  
TURN OFF YOUR VEHICLE AND . . .

He could see a roadblock a quarter mile in the distance, set up at a fork in the highway.

More than twenty cars and trucks. Sand bags. Staunch artillery.

He was passing vehicles now on the shoulder that had been shot to hell and burned.

DO NOT FUCKING MOVE

The cars behind him were close now, one of them a Jeep Grand Cherokee with the roof cut out and two men with machineguns standing on the back seat, ready to unload.



Jack brought the minivan to a full stop, put it in park, and turned off the engine.

The Jeep hung back thirty yards.

Jack looked over at Donald, started to rouse him, then thought, Why wake the man just to be killed?

Six heavily-armed men in body armor strode up the middle of the highway toward the minivan, one of them dragging an emaciated man along by a leash in one hand, the other holding a cattle prod.

They didn't strike Jack as military, didn't carry themselves so cocksure.

As if it had been scripted, the greeting party stopped thirty yards out from the front bumper of the minivan, and the tallest of the bunch raised a bullhorn to his mouth.

"Both of you, out of the car."

Jack grabbed Donald's arm. "Come on, we have to get out."

The man wouldn't move.

"Donald."

"You have five seconds before we open fire."

Jack opened his door and stepped out into the highway with his hands raised.

"You in the car, get out or—"

"He doesn't hear you," Jack yelled. "His mind is gone."

“Lay down on your stomach.”

Jack got down onto his knees and then prostrated himself across the rough, sun-warmed pavement. Listened to the sound of their footsteps coming toward him, and he didn't dare move or even raise his head to watch them approach. Just lay there with his heart throbbing against the road, wondering, from a strangely detached perspective, if this was how and where it would end for him.

The men stopped several feet away.

One of them came forward and Jack felt hands running up and down his sides, his legs.

“Clean.”

“Go check the other guy. You, sit up.”

Jack sat up.

“Where's Benny?”

One of the guards produced a blindfolded rail of a man, naked, beaten to within an inch of his life, bruises covering his body and face, his hands cuffed and a chain linking his ankles above his bare feet.

The tall, bearded man pointed a large revolver at Jack's face and asked him his name.

“Jack.”

“Is there a bomb in your van?”

“No.”

The one who'd frisked Jack peered over the front

passenger door, said, “This one’s completely checked out.”

The bearded man stared at Jack. “Jack, I want to introduce you to Benny.” Benny’s handler gave a hard tug on the leash, dragging him within a foot of Jack. “Here’s the deal. If Benny likes you, I’m going to blow your brains out all over the road. If he doesn’t, we’ll talk.” He looked at Benny. “Ready, boy? Ready to do some work?”

Benny nodded. He was salivating.

“Benny, I’m going to take your blindfold off and show you our new friend.”

Benny urinated on the pavement.

“If you do good, I’ll give you some water and a treat. Are you going to do a good job?”

Benny made a sound that wasn’t human, and then the bearded man nodded to his handler, who pulled off the blindfold. The wildman crouched in front of Jack. Eyes ringed with black and yellow bruises but still a deep clarity and intensity in them. He was inches from Jack’s face. Smelled terrible, like he’d been bedding down in his own shit, and he seemed to be staring at something on the back of Jack’s skull.

Jack looked up at the man holding the revolver. “What the fuck is—”

Never saw the thing move, but Benny was suddenly

on top of him and trying to tear Jack's throat out with his teeth. Took three men to drag it away and several jolts from the cattle prod before it finally collapsed in the road and curled up moaning in the fetal position.

Jack scrambled back toward the van, trying to catch his breath, the man with the revolver moving toward him, saying, "It's all right. This is good news. If Benny had crawled into your lap and started cooing, you wouldn't be with us anymore."

"What is that thing?"

"Benny's our pet. Our affected pet. He checks out everyone who tries to come into the city. I'm Brian, by the way." He offered a hand, helped Jack onto his feet.

"Is the city safe?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. We figure there's ten, fifteen thousand people here. Many have left, gone north toward the border, but that's a rough trip. It's heavily guarded up there. We've got all the roads into town protected."

"No affected in the city?"

"Nope."

"How's that possible?"

"It was cloudy the night of the event over this part of Montana."

"You haven't been attacked?"

"Not by any force that stood a chance. We've got

five thousand armed men ready to fuck shit up on a moment's notice."

Jack looked around, the RPMs of his heart falling back toward baseline.

"Has a woman with two children passed through in the last week?"

"I don't think so. You have a picture?"

"No."

"Your wife and kids?"

Jack nodded.

"You're the first person to even come up this road in three days. Are they coming here to meet you?"

"I don't know. I don't know where they are. We were separated in Wyoming." He looked at the rest of the crew. "Any of you seen them?"

Nothing but headshakes and sorrys.

"My boy is affected," Jack said. "He isn't symptomatic or violent, but he saw the lights. He's seven years old. Would you let him in?"

"How's it possible he isn't like the others?"

"I don't know, but he isn't. His name is Cole."

"We'll keep an eye out for them," Brian said. "If he isn't hostile, we'll let your family through."

"You swear to me?"

"We don't kill kids." Brian pointed through the windshield at Donald. "Friend of yours?"

“I picked him up this morning outside of White Sulphur Springs, just walking down the middle of the road. He needs medical attention.”

“Well, there’s shelters set up at some of the schools. You might find a doctor at one of those.”

“There’s an Air Force base here, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s been on lockdown since everything went to hell. I guess it’s understandable—they’ve got the silos holding the Minuteman nuclear missiles.”

Jack climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“You’ll let me through?”

“Absolutely.” He closed Jack’s door. “Safe travels.”

Jack had passed through the outskirts of Great Falls a handful of times in the last ten years during those long driving trips to see his father when his old man had still lived in Cut Bank. But he hadn’t been in the city proper since he and Dee had left to start a life in Albuquerque, sixteen years ago. Thought this might be the most peculiar circumstance under which to experience the emotion of nostalgia.

Driving the quiet streets, he found it haunting to see the darkness fall upon a city that had no light to raise in its defense.

In the blue dusk, he passed an ice cream shop he and Dee had frequented all those years ago on

Friday nights. But everything else, at least what little he could see of it, had changed.

He drove to a hospital and cruised past the emergency room entrance, dark and vacated.

Went on.

There was no one out. The streets empty. The geography of the town might have been an asset, might have stoked his memory, had there been streetlights to guide him. But it was as dark as the countryside in these city limits. He drove for thirty minutes, dipping into the reserve tank, rambling in search of anything that resembled a shelter.

The engine had already sputtered once when he saw the soft smears of light through windows in the distance, and as the form of the building took shape, he recognized it—a high school. People were milling around the steps that climbed to the main brick building, the cherry glow of their cigarettes barely visible in the dark.

Jack pulled over to the curb and turned off the minivan.

He was thirsty again.

“Donald,” he said. “We’re at a shelter. They might have hot food. Clean water. Cots. I’ll find a doctor to look at you. We’re in a safe city now. You’ll be taken

care of.”

Donald leaned against the door.

“Don? You awake?” Jack reached over and touched the man’s hand.

Cool and limp.

His neck gave no pulse.

Jack climbed the steps to the school. Inside, candlelight flickered off the lockers and it smelled worse than a homeless shelter—stink of body odor and rancid clothing. Cots stretched down the length of the hallway, and everywhere the noise of hushed conversations and snoring. A baby crying somewhere. He didn’t smell food.

He walked a long corridor, cots on either side and open suitcases—barely enough room him to make his way down the middle without trampling someone’s filthy laundry.

Five minutes of negotiating the crowded hallways brought him to the entrance of a gymnasium, where a woman sat at a folding table reading by candlelight a library-bound edition of *Treasure Island*. She looked up at Jack with what he imagined to be the no-bullshit demeanor of a mathematics teacher, or worse, a principal.

“You’re new,” she said.



“Yeah.”

“You from Great Falls?”

“Albuquerque. I’m looking for my family. My wife is Dee. She’s short, brown hair, beautiful. Forty years old. My son is Cole, and he’s. . .” As he said Cole’s name, he thought about Benny and the roadblocks at the edge of town.

“Sir?”

“He’s seven. My daughter is Naomi and she’s fourteen, looks a lot like her mother.”

“And you think they’re here?”

“I don’t know. We were separated, but I think they might have come to Great Falls—”

“Doesn’t ring a bell, but we’ve got over two thousand people here. Look, I wish I could offer you a cot, but we’re maxed out and I don’t know when more food is coming. The Air Force base had been trucking in MRE rations, but we haven’t seen them in five days.” She sounded tired and emotionless. Jack thinking, You haven’t seen anything.

He glanced through the open doors into the gymnasium—a mass of sleeping bodies.

“There a morgue around?” he asked. “I’ve got a dead man in my car. Guy I picked up this morning who didn’t make it.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to tell you.

We're in a little bit of chaos here."

"If you see my family, tell them I was here looking for them."

Jack drove to a nearby park that took up a single city block. Unbuckled Donald's seatbelt, pulled him out of the front passenger seat, dragged him away from the car. He made it as far as a boulder surrounded by flower boxes whose contents lay in ruin, but could take him no further. He laid Donald down in the grass beside the rock and folded the man's hands across his chest.

Sat with him for a long time in the dark, mostly because he didn't feel right just leaving Donald here alone. Thinking there was something more to be done, though he had no idea what. The breeze was pushing those empty swings, one of them making an awful creaking noise that set Jack's nerves even more on edge.

After a while, he said, "This is the best I can do, Don. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about everything."

And he got up and walked back to the van.

Drove fifteen blocks toward the river, the engine sputtering, cylinders misfiring. He'd wanted to make it to the water, but that wasn't going to happen.

The feeble moonlight was shining off the columns of the civic center several blocks ahead. When he saw them, he realized where he was and brought the minivan to a stop in the middle of the street. He sat staring in disbelief toward the square, little to see in the powerless dark but the five-story block of the Davidson Building. Wondered how it had not occurred to him until this moment to come here.

He put the van back into gear and cranked the steering wheel. Drove over the lip of the sidewalk into the middle of the square between two rows of potted evergreen trees.

Jack turned off the van. Sat in the dark and the quiet, listening to the engine cool. He was in a dark plaza, buildings on either side of him, joined by a skywalk. The fountain nearby, dormant.

So much as he had imagined it, even after all this time.

He opened his door and stepped down onto the concrete. It was cold. There were clouds scudding through the light of the moon. Silence like this was one thing in the wilderness, a completely different matter in the city. No cars out, no people, not even the hum of streetlamps or powerlines. Too dark. Too quiet. Everything wrong.

It hit him. Pure exhaustion. The emotional

expenditure of the day. Felt the call of sleep, and the idea of a few hours of unconsciousness, of checking out of all of this, had never sounded better.

The minivan still smelled like death.

He cracked all the windows and laid the front seat back as far as it would go.

\* \* \* \* \*

WHEN his eyes opened he was staring through the windshield at the windows of an office building thirty feet above him. A sheet of clouds reflected in the dark glass. He sat up. Hungry. Cold. Opened the door and stepped down onto the plaza. Eighteen years ago, there had been a coffeehouse a block from here, and he could almost smell the memory of their French roast, feel how the heat of it had steamed into his face on mornings just like this.

He walked toward Central Avenue. Strange not to know the day, but he was certain it was November now. The sky certainly looked it, and the steel chill in the air felt it. Clouds soft and pregnant, debating whether to snow or drop cold rain.

Up and down the avenue, not a single car on the street. A few of the stores had been looted, broken glass on the sidewalk. Nothing moved but some dead leaves scraping across the road.

Jack went back at the minivan and looked inside. Don's youngest daughter had been sitting in the third

row from what Jack could tell. It looked to him like she'd made the space her own—iPod, magazines, books, a stuffed penguin that had been dragged around forever.

He lifted a drawing pad out of the floorboard, stared at a half-finished sketch of countryside that looked remarkably similar to the Montana waste where he'd stumbled upon this van. She had talent. All she'd used was a black Magic Marker to suggest a sharpened mountain range, miles of sagebrush, and the road that shot a lonely trajectory through that country. He wondered if she'd been drawing when her family was ridden down. A line stopped abruptly at the summit of a mountain, the downslope never finished. The black marker she'd used still lay uncapped on the carpet.

Jack picked a cigar box off the floor, raised the lid.

Markers, pastel pencils, miniature bottles of acrylic paint, charcoal, brushes, erasers, and a sterling silver-etched heart locket that only ten-year-old boys give to ten-year-old girls.

Couldn't bring himself to open it.

He was all morning writing her name. Big, block letters on the sliding door, the black Sharpies showing up well on the minivan's white paint. He used up three markers coloring in the letters, then took a

bottle of white acrylic paint and brushed her name onto the dark plateglass windows of the surrounding buildings.

Walked out into the street to test the visibility.

Dee's name couldn't be missed, even from fifty yards away.

By early afternoon a light mist was falling, and he sat in the front seat behind the wheel, watching the beads of water populate the glass.

Drifted off and when he woke again it was dark and a harder rain falling. He crawled into the very back and stretched out across the young girl's seat. Wrapped himself in a blanket that still carried her smell. Hungry but he thought he should start rationing his bag of junk food, which contained only twelve packages when he'd taken inventory this morning.

The rainfall on the minivan roof was a good sound. He thought about his family until it hurt too much, and then he went to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

THUNDER is what it sounded like in his half-conscious state, and it made the windows tremble. Jack tugged the blanket away from his face, lay there

listening to see if it would come again, thinking he might've dreamed it.

It came again. Not thunder.

This was a deeper, focused sound, and it didn't roll across the sky.

He crawled out of the backseat and pulled open the side door.

Walked through the plaza into the street.

Late morning. A low cloud deck. The pavement wet.

He heard it again. Far off. Perhaps beyond the city. He'd never heard it before, not in real life, but he knew it was the sound of bombs exploding.

The plateglass on the first floor of the Wells Fargo bank had been smashed out some time ago. Jack stepped through into the lobby. Dark, silent. He looked at the vacant bank teller stations. The velvet rope lines. Signs for commercial and residential mortgage departments. A water fountain stood against the wall between the men's and women's restrooms. He walked over and turned the knob. Nothing. He went into the women's restroom and tried the faucet. Dry. There was water in the toilets, but he wasn't at that point just yet. Comforting to know it was here, though.



He crossed the plaza to the Davidson Building. The entrance doors were locked. The glass intact. He uprooted a baby fir tree from a concrete planter which must have weighed fifty or sixty pounds. When he'd finally hoisted it up, he ran toward the doors and heaved the planter at the glass like an oversize shot put.

Straight through. Shattered across the marble floor.

He took his time stripping branches from the fir tree, relieved just to have something to occupy his mind. When he'd finished, he unbuttoned his outer shirt and tore it into long strips. Raised the hood of the minivan, unscrewed the cap to the oil tank, dipped the pieces of his shirt inside. He tied the oil-coated cloth around the end of the stick, no idea if this would even work. He'd seen some version of it on a TV survival show several years ago, but he kept thinking he was missing a step.

He held the glowing orange coils of the van's cigarette lighter to a dry corner of the fabric.

A flame appeared, crept across the cloth, and then the end of Jack's torch ignited.

It burned beautifully.

He laughed out loud.

Jack arrived on the fourth-floor landing, firelight flickering off the concrete walls of the stairwell. He opened the door and stepped out into a carpeted hallway. Moved down the corridor, brass nameplates catching torchlight. Stopped at a window with the words financial advisors stenciled across the glass. In the firelight, he could see a waiting area, several chairs, a small table stacked with magazines. Jack tried the door, then set the torch on the fire-retardant carpet, lifted the metal trashcan standing beside an elevator, and hurled it at the glass.

Through the office windows, daylight filtered in. Down the length of the wall, he studied a photographic series of grinning salesmen. He carried his torch into a breakroom and opened the refrigerator. A dozen cups of undoubtedly-spoiled yogurt. Something wrapped in tinfoil. A Styrofoam box of leftovers that smelled like a rotting corpse.

A water cooler stood nearby.

He lodged the torch in the sink and knelt down on the floor. Held his mouth under the tap and drank until his stomach ached.

He entered a corner office and sat in the leather

chair behind the desk. Propped his feet up and stared at framed photographs—a soccer team of boys in green uniforms, a family—sunglassed and screaming—on a raft in the midst of whitewater, three beer-flushed men, arm-in-arm, in the fairway of a golf course. He swiveled around in the chair and rolled toward the window. A half mile to the west, he could see the Missouri. The water gray-green under the clouds. Plains beyond. Down in the plaza, the minivan stood glazed in rainwater.

A plastic inbox tray rattled on the glasstop.

The building shook.

Two seconds later, he heard the blast.

Miles away, south of town, black smoke lifted off the prairie.

He carried the half-filled canister of water down the stairwell and through the lobby.

Outside, a light rain fell, the air cold enough to cloud his breath.

He climbed into the minivan and curled up in the backseat under the little girl's blanket. Shut his eyes. Rain hammering the metal roof.

My day, he thought. Fire and water.

Black of night, he shot awake.

Not only explosions but gunfire now. Inside the city limits.

He climbed into the front seat and peered through the windshield.

The sky lit up—cushions of cloud overhead and snow falling out of them.

Darkness.

The delayed boom of whatever artillery shell had just exploded.

A brighter flash toward the horizon.

Then black.

No way he was going back to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

JACK watched the sky lighten through the glass, his fists still clenching the steering wheel, as they had for the last two hours. Like listening to a hurricane come ashore and the intensifying terror of the eye wall creeping closer. The sound of war coming.

He straightened up in the seat, pushed open the door, stepped outside. Snow clung to everything, and he brushed it off the minivan's sliding door to uncover Dee's name.

Realized he was crying. What if the guards hadn't allowed Cole into the city? Would Dee have even

risked an entry this close to the border? No. She'd have gone around, tried to rush the kids across. They might even be in Canada by now. They might be dead in Wyoming. Might be anywhere. But not here. Not with him.

He sat down in the snow.

They weren't coming.

They weren't coming.

They weren't—

The jackhammer pounding of a machinegun broke out what couldn't have been more than a few blocks away.

He pulled himself up by the door handle and staggered out into the street which was lined with mostly two- and three-story buildings and trees with a few orange leaves left dangling.

Three blocks down, muzzleflashes blossomed from a top floor window.

The firing went on for a full minute.

When it stopped, silence fell upon the city.

Specks of snow seemed to hang weightless in the air.

Jack stood in the street for a long time, but the shooting was over.

He walked back to the minivan, suddenly hungry, but even more tired, and he was asleep seconds after

his head hit the seat cushion. He slept so hard it seemed like barely a minute had passed, and then he was awake again, his eyes burning with strain and disorientation and a noise like Armageddon right on top of him.

He peered over the back of the seat, saw people running through the square, twenty feet beyond the front bumper of the van. Dressed like civilians, he thought, in shabby clothes so tattered they all appeared to be molting. The three men bringing up the rear held shotguns at waist-level. They were backpedaling and firing and Jack could see the abject fear in their faces laced with the mad rush of adrenaline, something screaming at him to get the fuck down, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. The shotguns thundered and one of the men collapsed and then the small platoon streamed into the Davidson building.

For fifteen seconds, nothing. No sound. No movement.

Then a company of black-clad men swarmed the square, some of them taking position behind the planters, a handful charging into the building.

Jack got down into the floorboard and flattened himself against the carpet, pulling the blanket on top of him as machineguns erupted all around him, men

yelling over the mayhem, the shotguns booming down out of the building several floors above, pellets and rounds chinking into the side of the minivan, and then a window exploded, glass everywhere, and the van sank to one side, a tire punctured.

A man began to scream nearby, and Jack covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut and he was saying her name. He could feel his lips moving, though he couldn't hear the words, not even inside his head, over the terrible noise.

An explosion blew out every window in the van and then came a lull.

Numerous footsteps pounded the concrete. Someone shouted, and the next time Jack heard gunshots, they sounded distant, muffled.

He waited for another minute, then slowly sat up. Brighter in the van with the tinted windowglass shot out. A half-dozen men lay scattered across the plaza, one of them still crawling.

On the fourth floor of the Davidson building a black crater smoked, ragged flames cutting through.

Jack made his way up into the driver seat and eased the door open.

Gunshots inside the Davidson building.

He stared at the bank. Twenty yards tops. Get inside. Find an office, crawl under a desk. Wait for

silence.

He glanced back toward the Davidson building. A man stepped out of the lobby and walked into the square. He was looking at the minivan. Jack ducked as far as he could under the steering wheel. More voices. Orders being shouted. Fading away now. He eased up into the seat again and peered through the shattered windshield. The black-clad men had lined the civilian platoon up in the middle of the street. They were making them get down on their knees at gunpoint.

A man in a red bandana stood in front of the POWs. Jack could just hear his voice from the front seat of the van, telling them he would be pleased to shoot them each in the head, felt sure they would in turn be pleased with this outcome. However, if even one of them resisted, his unit would spend the rest of the day torturing them to death.

A handful of the civilians wept. He could see their shoulders bobbing. But no one moved.

The man in the red bandana went to the first civilian, pulled a handgun from his holster, and shot him between the eyes.

He went on down the line, stopping midway to reload, Jack watching the heads of the condemned snapping back, bodies toppling, found himself drawn



to study the unimaginable bracing of the next one to die.

Ultimate tension, then emptiness, then ten people lay dead on the snow-dusted street where ten had knelt living thirty seconds before. The soldiers left them there, drifting on down Central Avenue toward the river, in a formation that made Jack certain they were military.

When the last man had slipped out of view, Jack breathed again, leaning forward, his forehead touching the steering wheel.

Staying here, in this plaza, wasn't going to work. Not with the city under siege.

Meant pushing on.

As he lifted his head, the man in the red bandana reappeared around the corner of the Davidson building. He was walking back into the square, straight toward the van. Jack's heart jumped from zero to afterburn, a hot spike of panic flooding in.

He slammed his shoulder into the door and barreled out of the minivan at a dead sprint toward the bank, waiting for the gunshots, waiting, the shattered windows rushing toward him, waiting. Just as he reached them, he heard three shots squeezed off faster than he could have imagined, and he was inside, untouched he thought, turning left now, bolting

up a set of stairs into the mortgage department, dark save for where crumbs of daylight filtered in through the offices that overlooked the plaza.

Jack stopped.

He could hear the man's footfalls in the lobby down below.

Now running up the stairs.

Jack moved into a large, open maze of cubicles and desks, his world getting darker every step he took away from those windows.

He got down on his hands and knees and crawled under a desk. Couldn't see a thing. Panting. The noise deafening. He shut his eyes, tried to calm himself, and when his heart finally slowed, he heard the footsteps—soft as mice—moving into the mortgage department toward him.

He took long, slow inhalations through his nose, and even in the dark chill of the bank, lines of sweat were running down out of his hair into his eyes.

The man let out a sharp breath. Couldn't have been more than four or five feet away.

His footsteps trailed off into the black, only audible when the boot tread caught on the carpet—an imperceptible scratch.

Jack's legs burned. He'd crammed himself up underneath a desk, the wood digging into his

backbone.

Five minutes passed without a sound.

Ten minutes.

Twenty.

Then an hour was gone, maybe longer. Impossible to know.

He leaned forward, rocking slowly back onto his hands and knees, his feet tingling with an excruciating numbness. Crawled several feet into the dark and stood, knees popping.

He glanced back over his shoulder, saw the barest thread of light sliding around a corner. Wondering, should I crawl back under the desk and wait a few more hours? Maybe the man with the red bandana had gone to get a flashlight. Maybe he'd left with no intention of returning. Maybe he was waiting out there just around the corner.

Jack moved forward between the cubicles, back into the light.

He stepped into the hallway.

Back down the stairs, through the lobby. He stood in that glassless window frame looking out across the plaza.

Snowing again. Nothing moving. The minivan riddled with bulletholes. Some of the dead lay beside their weapons, and he felt a subtle charge at the

prospect of getting his hands on a gun again.

Ten steps into the plaza, Jack bent down to unwind the strap of a machinegun that had tangled around the arm of a dead man.

Froze as his finger touched the strap. An icy prickle down the center of his back. A door to the minivan was creaking open.

Jack let go and stood up, turning slowly.

The man in the red bandana sat in the front passenger seat, lighting a cigarette. "Finally." Took a deep drag. "Didn't want you to see the smoke."

He started toward Jack, motioning him away from the dead man with his automatic pistol.

"The fountain," he said.

Jack crossed the plaza, never taking his eyes off the man, as if that somehow kept the balance of control in his favor.

The fountain was a circle of old concrete, fifteen feet across, with a stone feature rising out of the middle that had once rained water. Most of it had long since evaporated, and what remained was stagnant and filled with discs of ice.

The men sat five feet apart.

Jack saw that the man's hands were covered in dried blood that was cracking on his skin like old asphalt. He looked out at the plaza—the minivan, the

dead, the blood on the melting snow.

In proximity, the soldier looked nothing like Jack had imagined. A kinder face. Three-day beard. Thoughtful eyes. Curls of black hair that slipped out from under the bandana. His fatigues weren't black as Jack had first thought, but some pattern of night camouflage comprised of dark blues.

Might have been Jack's age, perhaps a year or two younger.

He stared at Jack while he smoked, handgun resting on his leg, trained on Jack's stomach.

"Is Dee alive?"

Jack didn't respond.

"Where's your family, Jack?"

A twinge of curiosity cut through the fear.

"How do you know my name?"

The man smiled, Jack feeling the eerie prickling of recognition.

He said, "Kiernan."

"I saw her name all over this square, and it didn't even click with me until I was walking away."

"What are you doing here?"

"Me and some Guard unit buddies from Albuquerque defected. We've been heading north, just like you, killing and fucking and ravaging and just causing all sorts of mayhem. Time of my life. Are you

expecting Dee and the family? Because we can wait. I'd be totally up for that."

"I haven't seen them in days."

"You got separated?"

Jack nodded.

"Where?"

"Wyoming. Where's your family, Kiernan? I seem to remember Dee telling me you had children."

Kiernan took another drag. "Rotting in our backyard back in New Mexico."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I killed them."

Jack could feel, even in the light of everything he'd seen, a new horror at the registration of this.

Kiernan smiled. "Smoke?"

"Not in years."

He tugged a crumpled pack of Marlboro Reds out of an inner pocket, offered it to Jack. "Treat yourself. I don't think it really matters anymore. Do you, Jack?"

Jack's hands shook. He plucked a crooked cigarette from the pack along with the lighter. Four attempts to fire the tobacco sprigs hanging out of the end. Kiernan got another cigarette for himself.

"So why are you here, Jack?" he asked. "In this square out of all the places in the wild wild west?"

Jack said nothing, just pulled the smoke into his

lungs. It was sweet and it burned.

“You think Dee’s going to find you here. That it?”

Jack exhaled, felt the nicotine hit and drag him a few steps deeper into himself, like sliding a filter between this moment and his perception of it. A dulling of the fear.

“Can I ask you something?” Jack said.

“As long as your cigarette’s still burning.”

“When you’re trying to fall asleep at night, do you see the faces of your wife and children?”

“Sometimes.”

“How do you not kill yourself?”

“That you could even ask that is a perfect demonstration of why you’re all being slaughtered. Now answer my question. Why are you here?”

The idea of lunging at Kiernan occurred to Jack, and with it a monster dose of weakness and fear that slashed through his nicotine rush.

Kiernan smirked. “You’d never pull it off. Not on your best day and my worst. Answer my fucking question.”

“I’m here because this is where I ran out of gas.”

“Why do you want to make me angry?”

Jack smoked.

“In all my travels north,” Kiernan said, “I was always looking for your green Land Rover. Always chasing you and Dee, even though I never expected to actually

find you.”

“What is it like?” Jack said.

“What is what like?”

“To have become. . .whatever you are now.”

“All our life, Jack, we spend wondering, you know? Now, it’s all about knowing.”

“You were blind but now you see?”

“Something like that.”

“What do you know now that you didn’t before?”

“You taught philosophy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So you know. . .words just fuck up true meaning. Even if I could make you understand, I wouldn’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“You didn’t see the lights. Just so I’m clear. . .you have no way to contact Dee, but you think she’s going to show up here. Why? Was it prearranged in the event you two were—”

“I’ve been here three days. She’s not coming.”

“She could be dead.”

“It’s all I think about. How many children did you have?”

“Three.”

Jack flicked off the ash.

“Did you look in their eyes while you murdered them?”



“I was crying. They were crying, asking what they’d done. My wife screaming. Horrible day. I need to know why you’re here before your cigarette’s gone. The curiosity will eat at me.”

“I told you. I ran out of gas.”

Kiernan shook his head. “You’re going to make me threaten you. Aren’t you?”

“Fuck your lights and fuck you.”

Kiernan let his cigarette slip out of his hand, hiss out in the snow. He stood, lifting his shirt so Jack could see the sheathed Ka-Bar combat knife.

“When I open you up and start pulling stuff out and feeding it to you, you will talk. You will tell me everything I want to know and more. You’ll curse Naomi and Cole with your last breath and beg me to do the same to them.”

Still had an inch of tobacco to go, but Jack threw his cigarette into the pool.

“You can’t touch it, and you know it, and it kills you, doesn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Even if I could make you understand, I wouldn’t.”

Kiernan unsnapped the sheath, holstered his pistol, and drew the Ka-Bar.

“One last thing,” Jack said. “You and your batshit-crazy friends have fucked up our world, but you’ve

also made me a better father, and you made me love my wife again, and for that I thank you.”

Jack stared down into the pool.

The ice melted and the water turned clear and the fountain began to rain. He looked up. The sky now a bright, almost painful blue. Midday in the square. A dozen people eating lunch in the blinding fall sunshine.

Jack sat with an iced coffee, ten minutes left on his lunch break.

She sat at that same table fifteen feet away, engrossed in a textbook, a tray of half-eaten salad pushed aside. Third day in a row she'd eaten lunch in the plaza. Third day in a row he couldn't take his eyes off her.

He'd walked up to strange women before and asked for a date. No big deal. He was good-looking and tall. Confident. But something about this girl put him off his game. She was gorgeous, sure, but it was more than that—maybe the white lab coat fucking with him (already fantasized about that), maybe the intensity with which she read—never moving except to turn the page or brush away a strand of loose, auburn hair that contained honest-to-God strands of gold.

Yesterday, he'd spent the whole hour building up the nerve. Finally he stood with five minutes left,

shaky, his mouth completely dry as he approached, caught a whiff of something—shampoo or body wash—and he knew he'd only make a fool of himself. Walked right on past into the Wells Fargo bank and just stood watching her through the tinted glass until she finally packed her book into a tattered Eastpak and went on her way.

Now there were five minutes left in this hour. A repeat of yesterday. He'd fucked around and put himself in the same position.

He stood quickly and started toward her table, trying to get there before he had the chance to talk himself out of it. He was three feet away from her, wholly uncommitted to any of this, when the tip of his sneaker caught on the lip of a concrete slap.

Jack went down hard and fast, and when he looked up from the ground he was staring at the rivulets of his iced coffee running down her leg and dripping off the hem of her lab coat.

“Oh my God,” he said, picking himself up. “Oh my God.” As he got back onto his feet, he saw that he'd somehow managed to dump his entire coffee on her book, her white coat, skirt, even in her hair—maximum damage inflicted with half a cup of iced coffee.

She glared up at him, possibly more shocked than

he was, Jack mumbling, trying to string together a coherent sentence that finally came together as, “I’m a total idiot.”

The anger in her eyes melted away. She wiped the coffee from her face and looked down at her coat, and all Jack could think was that she was even more beautiful at point blank range.

“Let me pay for the book and the coat and—”

She waved him off.

“It’s okay. You all right? That looked bad.”

“Yeah.” He’d have a black bruise on his elbow by nightfall, but in this moment, he felt no pain. “I’ll live once I get passed the devastating humiliation.”

She laughed. Like nothing he’d ever heard. “Oh, come on, wasn’t that bad.”

“Actually, it was.”

“No, it—”

“I was coming over to ask you out.”

Her face went blank.

Longest moment of his life.

“Bullshit,” she finally said.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re just having fun with me.”

Jack smiled. “Would you give me a do-over?”

“A what?”

“A do-over. Let me have another shot at this.”

He couldn't tell for sure in the brilliant afternoon sunlight, but she might have blushed.

"Okay," she said.

"I'll be right back. It'll go better, I promise."

Jack walked to the fountain. His heart beating so fast he could barely breathe. He sat down and looked over at the table. She was watching him now and she'd taken her sunglasses off. He started toward her again, stopping at her table with his back to the sun, so she sat in his shadow.

"I'm Jack," he said.

"Hi, Jack, I'm Deanna. Sorry about this mess. Some asshole spilled his coffee all over me."

And she smiled, and he looked into her eyes for the first time. Had never felt anything like it. Up until this moment, he thought he'd experienced pure attraction, but all those other times, other women, had been lust—he saw that now—and this wasn't that. Not *just* that. There was an energy present, something combusive between them that hit him in the solar plexus. She had eyes that were dark blue but also luminescent, and later, when he thought about them, their color and clarity would remind him of a lake where he'd often camped with his father in Glacier, so deep but so clear the sunlight shot all the way down to the stones at the bottom and made the water glow.

But he barely noticed the intensity of her eyes in the moment. It was all electricity, a terrible current, like looking into the future, everything prefigured—a life together, a daughter, a mortgage, a son born two months premature, the death of Jack's mother, an automobile wreck that would take Deanna's parents on Thanksgiving night eight years from now, moments of indescribable happiness, long winters of depression, a slow drifting, a betrayal, fear, anger, compromise, stasis, but when it all lay stripped to the bone, whatever mysterious alchemy had been present in this moment, would be present always. Untouched by their failures. Everything changed, and nothing.

This is what he saw, what he sensed on some primal frequency, when he looked into his wife's eyes for the first time on a fall day in the American west that was so perfect it would always break his heart to think of it. What he still felt, eighteen years later in the same city square, when his eyes met Dee's again.

She looked unreal, moving among the dead like a ghost toward the fountain, emaciated, tears riding down her cheeks.

Kiernan must have seen the glitch in Jack's attention, because he glanced back just as Dee raised an old revolver.

"What are you doing here, Kiernan?" she asked.

“Waiting for you, love.”

The gunshot reverberated between the buildings.

Kiernan stumbled back and sat down beside Jack.

He was still holding the knife, and Jack grabbed it and stood facing him.

Blood ran down the man's face out of a hole through his left eye.

The blade of the Ka-Bar passed through his chestplate with no effort and Jack buried it to the hilt. Kiernan toppled back into the icy pool, a cloud of murky red surrounding him, the weight of his boots and fatigues pulling him under as the one good eye blinked frantically.

Jack turned around and Dee was there. He pulled her down into the snow and he was on top of her, kissing her, like drinking water again, like breathing, and they came apart only to breathe, both crying like babies. He held her face in his hands and wouldn't let go for fear she would vanish or he'd wake up and realize it was him dying in the fountain and these were his last thoughts.

“You're here, aren't you?” he said, and he kept saying it, and she kept telling him that she was, and that she was real. He couldn't take his hands off her, and he couldn't believe this was happening.

“You didn’t have any problems getting Cole into the city?” Jack asked. They were walking up 3<sup>rd</sup> Street North toward the library, each holding two machineguns taken off the dead men in the square like a pair of bad action-flick heroes. “It was on lockdown when I got here several days ago. They weren’t letting any of the affected in, but I told them you might be passing through with a boy who was.”

“We drove in last night,” Dee said. “The barricade had been destroyed. We almost didn’t make it, Jack. Bombs going off everywhere. Gunfights on almost every block. A couple of really close calls. It’s a full-scale war on the east side of town. Thousands dead. Easily.”

They passed a law office that had been hit with a mortar shell. Wet pleadings plastered all over the sidewalk.

“How did you know to come to the square?”

Dee smiled. “How did you?”

“I’d gone to the shelter looking for you. Nobody had seen you or the kids. I drove downtown, out of gas, desperate, and then the headlights shone on the Davidson Building. Today was my third in the square. I didn’t know if you’d try to come here or just get the kids across the border. For all I knew, you were dead.”



“When I saw the mileage sign for Great Falls, I knew if you were alive, if you had any strength left in your body, you’d come to this place.”

“So you have a car?”

“Yeah.”

“You should’ve tried to cross the border without me.”

“Don’t say that. You wouldn’t have.”

Machineguns chattered a dozen blocks away.

“I came here this morning,” Dee said, “but it was crawling with soldiers.”

“You saw what I wrote on the side of the car?”

“I started crying when I saw it. Lost it. I hid until the soldiers left, but then Kiernan came back to kill you. I watched him chase you into the bank. I thought. . . . .” She shook off the wave of emotion. “You were in there so long.”

“I can’t believe you came here, Dee.”

She stopped and kissed him.

Half a mile away, a bomb exploded.

“Come on,” she said. “We better run.”

Jack knelt down beside the sofa in the historical archive room of the Great Falls Public Library. Dee shined a flashlight on the ceiling, and in the refracted light Jack looked down at his children, sleeping head-

to-toe. Touched his hand to Cole's back.

"Hey, buddy. Daddy's here."

Cole stirred, eyes fluttering. They opened, got so wide Jack knew the boy had given him up for dead.

"Is it you?" the boy said.

"It's me."

Cole seemed to think things over for a minute.

"I dream about you every night and you talk to me just like this, but every time I wake up, you're gone."

"You're awake, and I'm here, and I'm not going to be gone again."

He drew the boy into his arms.

"Why are you crying?" Cole said.

"Because I'm holding you, and I didn't think I ever would again."

Naomi sat up at the other end of the couch. "Oh my God." She burst into tears and lunged toward Jack, and he grabbed her, too, now holding his children in his arms, and he could not think of a time in his life when he'd been more overloaded with joy.

Dee wouldn't take his word for it that he was okay. She made him strip and examined every square inch of his body with the flashlight, starting with the recent gunshot wound to his right shoulder.

"How's it feel?"

“Pretty sore these last few days.”

“It’s infected. Come with me.”

She took him into the bathroom and cleaned the wound as well as she could with a few paper towels and antiseptic hand soap.

“You have to try and keep it clean until we find some bandages.”

She held up his left arm.

“What’s this?”

He slowly unwound the filthy bandage covering his ring finger.

Dee gasped when she saw it.

“Forgot to mention this,” he said. “Soldier at the top of Togwotee Pass cut it off.”

She grabbed the flashlight off the sink and shined the light on the jagged phalange and the scab trying to form across it.

Tears in her eyes again. “Your ring finger,” she said. “Your ring.”

Later, while the kids slept, he and Dee crashed on a sofa, and they talked as night fell. Soon it was pitch black except when light flickered through the tall windows in the archive room. Like watching a rainless thunderstorm, except even the most distant detonations shook the building’s foundation and

made dust rain down from the ceiling into their eyes.

Jack drifted off and when he woke again, he was still holding Dee on the couch.

Her ear against his mouth. Didn't know if she was sleeping. Whispered anyway. Told her how his heart was so full, how if they ever got someplace safe, he would spend every waking moment making her happy, loving her, loving Cole and Na. Fuck the life they'd walled themselves in with. He didn't care if they lived in a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Let them be poor. Let them scrape by. He just wanted to be with her, every second of every hour of every day. Wanted to see her old and slow and gray. Watch her hold their granddaughters, their grandsons.

She didn't respond except to make a sleepy sigh and to nuzzle in a little closer.

Jack sat up. The building shook, books falling off the shelves. His ears ringing. Dee was up too, her lips moving, but he couldn't hear anything, and then the sound came rushing back—the kids screaming, Dee shouting. He got to his feet, the room brilliantly lit through those tall windows by the flames consuming a building several blocks away, burning with such intensity he could feel the heat through the glass.

He opened his mouth to say something but a fast-building roar stopped him, something approaching, the noise of it getting louder and closer. And then it was right on top of them, like God screaming, and in the flamelight, Jack could see his children covering their ears, mouths dropped open, eyes wide with terror.

Then it was gone, and the room filled with enough silence for the sounds of distant machinegun fire to filter in.

Jack was panting—they all were.

He turned to Dee, said, “We’re—”

A flash of scalding white light. The window blew out and something hit Jack in the chest that was neither force nor sound, but a terrible fusion of the two, and he was lying on his back, his molars joggled loose in their beddings, telling himself to get up, to check on his children, but his legs were slow to respond.

The ringing in his ears had become a jackhammer.

He sat up, eyes still struggling after that blinding detonation.

The building across the street had taken a direct hit, and amid the massive flames, he could see steel girders sagging, melting in the heat.

He was unstable on his feet.

Dee looked all right. She was sitting up, stunned,

and he could see that her eyes were open, blinking slowly.

Cole and Naomi lay in fetal positions on the floor, still bracing, covering their heads and trembling. Jack put his hands on them and patted their backs, ran his fingers through their hair, and then Dee was beside him. He tried to say something to her, couldn't hear his own voice inside his head, but Dee grabbed his face and pulled him close enough to read her lips.

He slung the machinegun straps over his neck and carried Naomi down the staircase, Dee leading with the flashlight, Cole draped over her shoulder.

On the second-floor landing, Jack heard that sound again, muffled now but racing toward a violent climax, and then the building shook with such intensity he couldn't believe it resisted collapse.

Everywhere on the ground level, shelves had toppled. They waded through books, and the smell of old paper filled the air.

The shock wave had exploded the wall of windows at the entrance. They passed over mounds of shattered glass and outside into a nightmare world. Black smoke poured out of the ruins of whatever had stood across the street and at the pinnacle of the flagpole, the United States and Montana State flags

had begun to burn at the fringes.

Dee led Jack over to a green Cherokee parked out of sight between the building and a hedge.

She glanced back, yelled, "You drive," and tossed him a ring of keys.

Dee opened the rear passenger door and set Cole inside. Jack handed Naomi over, and after Dee had gotten their daughter in and shut the door, he put his lips to his wife's ear.

"How much gas?"

"Enough to reach the border."

"You have to be my gunner." She nodded. "Shoot any fucking thing that moves."

Jack climbed in behind the wheel and cranked the engine as Dee slammed her door and lowered the window.

His mind ran hot, trying to orient himself in the city.

Essentially two routes north—I-15 to Sweetgrass or Highway 87 to Havre.

He shifted into gear and eased the Jeep down through the steaming grass onto the pavement, the heat from the building across the street so intense it broke him out into a sweat.

He punched the gas, felt the wind and smoke streaming through the windshield into his face. The glass had been shot out, and that was going to make

driving at high speed infinitely more difficult.

By the time he rolled up on the next intersection, he'd decided to try the highway north out of town. Jack glanced over at Dee, who already had the machinegun shouldered and aimed out the window. He tapped her leg, mouthed, "You ready?" She nodded. He glanced into the backseat, saw his children down in the floorboards, didn't know if they could hear him, but he yelled, "Kids, do not lift your heads no matter what happens."

Jack turned onto 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue North and gunned the engine.

In the distance, tracers streamed into the low cloud deck, giving the eastern sky a radioactive burn.

They were doing eighty down the street, and he could barely see a thing in the absence of headlights and with the wind and smoke rushing into his face.

They shot through several dark blocks where nothing had been touched, Jack driving blind. He had reached to turn on the headlights when muzzleflashes erupted all around them like a swarm of fireflies, bullets striking the Jeep on every side and the windows exploding in fountains of glass, the racket of Dee's machinegun filling the car as she screamed at him to go faster.

They sped away from the gunfire.



One block of peace.

Jack uncertain whether his hearing was improving or if they were coming up on another battle but the sound of gunfire and exploding mortar shells became audible over the groaning engine.

At the next junction, he looked down the intersecting street and saw a tank rolling toward them, flanked by a pair of Strykers.

A quarter mile ahead, a succession of ten closely-staggered explosions lit up four city blocks, and Jack could feel the road shuddering underneath him, everything illuminated brighter than midday, as if the sun had gone supernova. He could see people drawn to the windowframes of almost every building they raced past—unarmed, doomed, gaunt faces awash in firelight.

In the rearview mirror, Jack saw that one of the Strykers had launched out ahead of the tank. From it issued several splinters of light and a low-frequency, concussive report, like someone pounding nails. Two 50-caliber rounds punched through the back hatch, one of them obliterating the dash.

They had reached the blast zone, and up ahead, the road vanished into towers of incomprehensible fire.

Jack swung a hard left and drove up a sidestreet

parallel to an elementary school, carpet-bombed into molten rubble.

The street teemed with people on fire who had fled the building, fifty of them he would have guessed. Their collective screams as they literally melted onto the pavement made Jack pray for deafness.

He was trying to drive around them, but they kept stumbling in front of the Jeep, and that Stryker was coming, nothing to do but drive through them, over them, Dee screaming, "Oh dear God," over and over, and then she started shooting.

Two blocks from the school, Jack spotted the sign for the highway, and he veered onto the road and pushed the gas pedal into the floorboard.

The street was empty and they were screaming north, all the fire and death confined to the rearview mirrors.

They shot across a river and through the northern outskirts of the city.

Jack finally turned on the headlights.

They were pushing a hundred now into a vast and welcoming darkness.

North of town, nothing but black, endless prairie. Even forty miles out, they could still see the glow of

everything burning and the tracer fire arcing through the sky. Jack had found a pair of sunglasses under the parking brake. He wore them against the wind, driving northeast now, the speedometer pegged and the noise like standing under a waterfall. The kids, and now Dee, crouched in the floorboards to escape it, but he didn't mind. The rush of wind meant that every passing second that city was falling farther and farther behind, and the Canadian border rushing closer.

Jack had just glanced at the ruined dash, wondering about the time, when he noticed the line of deep blue—just a single shade up from black—lying across the eastern horizon.

\* \* \* \* \*

DEE woke in the front passenger floorboard, cramped as hell, cold, and staring up at her husband who wore sunglasses, his hair blown back, face ruddy with windburn and the glow of what she guessed was sunrise. It was loud and the Jeep rode rough—either the shocks had given out or they were no longer traveling on a paved road.

She watched him. Even with the heavy beard coming in, he looked so thin, and her heart was

swelling. She'd lost him, felt the awful vacuum of their separation, and now she had him back, sitting three feet away. For once, she knew what she had, the kind of man he was, even in the face of all this. Knew she didn't need another thing for the rest of her life except to be with him. There was such a peace that accompanied that knowledge.

Jack must have felt her stare, because he looked down at her, grinning, but then his brow furrowed.

He touched her cheek.

She wiped the tears away and shook her head and climbed up into her seat.

Grassland. Far as she could see. Not a building in sight. Not a road. They were driving across the prairie.

Jack brought the Jeep to a stop in the grass and killed the engine.

The silence was astounding. It threw her into a state of semi-shock, her ears still ringing after last night.

She glanced into the backseat. Naomi and Cole lay curled up in their respective floorboards. She held her hands against their backs, confirmed the rise and the fall.

"Where are we?" she asked.

Her voice sounded muffled inside her head, like it was sourcing from a remote outpost.

Jack's came back equally distant, "North of Havre. I figure the border's about ten miles that way." He pointed through the gaping windshield toward a horizon of grass, everything glazed with frost.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked.

"Engine's been in the red awhile now. Plus, I have to pee."

Jack stood pissing the ice off the grass and trying to come to grips with the massive silence. White smoke trickled out of the Jeep's grille, and he could hear something hissing under the hood. Wondered if he'd toasted the water pump pushing the Jeep as hard as he had. He'd been taking it easy since leaving the paved roads north of Havre and driving onto the prairie, hoping it'd be the slower but safer route.

He walked back to the Jeep, climbed behind the wheel. Dee had set a few bottles of water and a pack of crackers on the center console, and they shared a meager breakfast together and watched the sun lift out of the plains.

It took an hour for the engine to cool, and then Jack cranked the Jeep and they went on. His attention stuck on the temperature gauge, the needle climbing

much faster than he would've liked, passing the halfway point after only a mile, and edging into the red at two.

Finally shut it down at 2.75 miles. Jack wondered if he'd killed the engine, because smoke was pouring out of the grill now.

Jack got out, raised the hood.

Wafts of smoke and steam billowed out, and it smelled bad, too, like things had cooked that shouldn't have. He had no idea what he was looking at, didn't even really know what the fuck a water pump was, or what function it served beyond stopping this from happening.

He left the hood raised and walked around to Dee's door.

"That doesn't look good," she said.

"It's not. We're going to have to wait awhile until it cools again."

Two hours later, the engine had stopped smoking, and when Jack engaged the ignition, the temperature gauge dropped almost back to baseline.

The kids were awake and thrilled to discover the bag of junk food Jack had scored at the ski area. Cole's smiling mouth was smeared with chocolate.

Jack shifted into drive and studied their progress in

tenth-mile increments on the odometer, the landscape scrolling by so slowly.

At one mile, the needle had almost touched the red again, and smoke was coming out of the engine, the wind driving it up the hood and into the car.

Jack stopped, turned off the engine.

So this became the architecture of their day.

Drive one mile.

Overheat.

Wait two hours.

Drive another mile.

Overheat.

Rinse.

Repeat.

In the late afternoon, they were stopped again at the edge of a gentle depression. The hood raised. No wind. White smoke coiling up into the sky. Dee sat in the front passenger seat, dozing. Jack lay with his children in the cool, soft grass, staring into the sky. Cole was snuggled up against his chest, the boy asleep.

“How far are we?” Naomi asked.

“Two, three miles.”

“You really think there are camps across the border?”

“Won’t know until we get there.”

“What if there aren’t? What if it’s no different on the other side? It’s just an imaginary line, right?”

“Na, somewhere north of here, we’ll come to a place where we don’t have to run anymore, and we’ll drive or walk or crawl until we get there.”

She moved closer, her head against his shoulder.

“We’re almost there, aren’t we, Daddy?”

Behind them, something chinked against the side of the Jeep.

“Almost, angel.”

A shot rang out across the prairie. Long ways off.

Jack sat up.

The echo going on and on.

“Was that a gun?” Naomi asked.

“I think so.”

Jack glanced back at the Jeep. Because of its dark color, he didn’t notice the bullethole right away, but he did see that Dee was awake, sitting up now.

“Mom’s up,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

He got onto his feet and walked to Dee’s door. The reflection of the sky in the windowglass—a gray sheet of clouds.

He pulled open the front passenger door.

Dee was pale, and she was looking up at him with a brand of fear in her eyes he’d only seen twice



before. Both times, she'd been in the throes of childbirth. The look had been pure desperation, like she'd committed herself to something she couldn't bear to finish.

He still didn't understand.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

"It hurts, Jack."

She looked down, and he did, too.

Her seat was full of bright red arterial blood and she was squeezing her right leg.

"Oh, Jesus," Jack said.

Naomi said, "What's wrong."

Jack yelled, "You and your brother run to the other side of the car."

"Why? What—"

"Just do what I fucking tell you."

Something struck the rear passenger door a foot away from Jack. He slid his right arm under Dee's legs and lifted her out of the seat.

The report broke out as he carried her around the smoking grille, Dee moaning when he set her down in the grass on the other side of the Jeep.

"What happened?" Naomi said.

"She's shot."

"Oh God." She covered her mouth with her hand.

Cole started to cry.

Jack's hand was slicked with warm blood that was beading and dripping off the ends of his fingers.

A round zipped through one of the back windows.

"Na, Cole, get behind the tires and lay flat against the grass." He looked at his wife. "You have to tell me what to do."

"I don't know if it nicked the femoral artery or what, but you've got to stop the bleeding right now or I'm going to go into hypovolemic shock and die."

"How do I do that?"

"Wrap something around my leg."

"Like a shirt?"

"Yes. Please hurry."

Jack ripped open his button-up shirt and tore his arms out of the sleeves as another bullet hit the Jeep.

Dee cried out when he lifted her leg and ran one of the sleeves underneath it.

"How tight?" he asked, tying the first knot.

"Cut my circulation off."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He slid the loop to the top of her thigh and bore down on the knot, then put his foot on it while he cinched it down again. He kept watching Dee's right hand which she'd been pressing into the wound, trying to stop the blood that pulsed between her fingers with

every heartbeat.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“I can’t tell.” She blinked several times, staring into the fading sky. He thought her eyes looked glassy. “Yeah,” she said finally. “It’s stopping.”

“Can I leave you for a minute?”

“Why?”

“I need to see if anyone’s coming.”

He opened the rear passenger door—no safe way to do this.

Moved quickly into the backseat and reached into the cargo area, grabbing two AR-15s and a pair of binoculars, then diving back outside as another gunshot resounded across the prairie.

Jack crawled around to the back of the Jeep, lay with his chest heaving against the ground and brought the binoculars to his eyes.

Pulled the prairie into focus.

Distant grass, waving in the wind. A backdrop of clouds going dark as night fell. A jackrabbit standing on its hind legs.

He made a slow scan of the horizon.

A pickup truck scrolled into view—old, beat-to-hell Chevy with equal parts paint and rust. He lowered the binoculars to gauge the true distance—a mile, possibly more—then glassed the truck again.

A woman stood in the bed staring through the scope of a high-powered rifle that she'd braced against the roof. The rifle bucked, soundless. A bullet hit the other side of the Cherokee with a hard ping, like it had struck one of the wheels.

The report was slow in reaching him.

While the woman loaded another long, brass-tipped cartridge, he panned down the prairie, starting when he saw them. The men already so close they took up the entire sphere of magnification—three of them in hunting camouflage, a man perhaps five years his senior and two teenagers who shared a strong resemblance.

The teen boys carried semiautomatic pistols and the man a double-barreled shotgun, their faces flushed from running.

Jack lowered the binoculars. They were less than a hundred yards away. No idea how he'd missed them.

He took up one of the machineguns, wondering how much ammo remained.

Looked over at Dee, the children huddled around her.

"They're coming, Dee."

"How many?" she asked.

"Three of them."

"I can help shoot," Cole said.

“I need you to stay with Mama.”

Jack crouched behind the rear, right wheel, fingering the trigger.

“Is this it, Jack?”

“No, this is not it.”

He eased up until he could just see through the panels of spiderwebbed glass. The footsteps had become audible, swishing through the grass. The men would be upon them in seconds.

He crouched back down behind the tire.

Shut his eyes, took three deep breaths.

Came suddenly to his feet and swung out around the corner of the Jeep with the AR-15 shouldered. The three men already scrambling to raise their weapons vanished behind the burst of fire, the steady recoil driving into his shoulder, and then the magazine was evacuated, the barrel smoking, the men cut down fifteen feet from the Jeep.

A bullet struck the taillight by Jack's leg, and he was back around the other side of the Jeep by the time the gunshot reached them.

“Are they dead, Daddy?”

“Yes.”

He lifted the other machinegun out of the grass.

“That one's empty,” Dee said. “We're out.”

He couldn't stand the pain in her voice.

Knelt down behind the tire again and raised the binoculars. The light was going fast. Took him a moment to find the pickup truck again, and when he had, it wasn't alone. Two other trucks had pulled up alongside it, their doors thrown open, and now he counted eight people, heavily-armed, in heated discussion.

"What?" Dee said. "What do you see? Jack."

"There's eight of them now. Three trucks."

"We have to go."

"Where, Dee? We'd get a mile, maybe two, before we broke down again."

"Then what, Jack?"

"We fight."

The people were climbing back into the trucks now.

"They're coming," he said.

Dee was struggling to sit up.

"You shouldn't be moving," he said.

"It doesn't matter. Give me a hand."

"Dee, you shouldn't—"

"Give me your fucking hand." He pulled her onto her feet, her right pant leg dark with blood. She used him for support, groaning as she limped over to the Jeep and opened the driver side door.

She climbed in behind the steering wheel.

"Dee, the car will break down. We are not—"

"I know *we're* not."

He felt something inside of him unhook.

"No."

Dee looked past him to her daughter. "Naomi, take Cole and gather up the weapons from the dead men."

"Mom."

"Right. Now." When the children were gone, she said, "I can't walk, Jack. It would be so easy for me to bleed out."

"We're going to get you help."

"We're all going to be dead in five minutes."

"Dee—"

"Listen to me. It's dusk. Soon, it'll be night. Let me —"

"No, Dee—"

"Let me take the Jeep. Those trucks will follow my lights. Think they're chasing us all down. By the time they catch up to me, it'll be dark, and you and the kids —" her voice broke "—you'll be safe."

"But we're almost there, baby."

"You run all night, Jack. Promise me you won't stop."

Over the roof of the Jeep, in the blue dusk across the plain, he could see three points of light.

"No."

"You ready to watch them die? Are you?"

"I'm not ready for this, Dee."

"I know."

Naomi and Cole were coming back over.

He grabbed her face and kissed her. There were tears running down their faces but they wiped them away as the kids arrived.

"There are trucks coming," Naomi said.

"I know, baby," Dee said. She looked at Jack. He took the handguns from Naomi and set them in Dee's lap.

"We're going due north," he told her. "You come to us."

Dee nodded. She looked down at Cole, her eyes glistening again. "Got a hug for Mommy?" The boy handed Jack the shotgun and leaned into the Jeep. Dee pulled Cole into her and kissed the top of his head. She glanced up at her daughter. "Na?"

"What are you doing?"

"Mom's going to run some interference for us."

"We're not staying together?"

Jack grabbed Naomi's arm and glared at her, his chin trembling. "Hug your mother, Na."

Naomi looked at Jack. She looked at Dee. She wrapped her arms around her mother, and as she sobbed into her chest, Jack heard the first distant grumble of the approaching trucks.



Already, it was dark and cold.

“Come on, angel.” Jack pulled Naomi away from Dee. “Take your brother into that depression, and you lie down in the grass at the bottom. I’ll be right there.”

“Daddy—”

“I know. Don’t think right now. Just go.”

Naomi gathered herself. “All right, Cole, let’s see what’s over here.”

“Where?” the boy said.

Dee watched her children run off down the hill into the dark.

“Let me take the car,” Jack said.

“I can’t walk,” Dee said. “The kids would have to leave me to find help. They’d be on their own. You want that?”

“Dee—”

“Stop wasting our last moment.”

He nodded.

“Do you know what I’m going to think about?” she said.

“What?”

“That day we had up at the cabin. That perfect day.”

“Wiffle ball in the field.”

She smiled. “Please get our children someplace safe. Make this mean something.”

“I swear to you I will.”

“I have to go now.”

“You have to stop crying so you can drive.”

In the distance, it was too dark to see the trucks, but their headlights were close enough to have separated into six points of light.

Jack kissed his wife once more and buried his face into the softness of her neck and just breathed her in. Then he looked into her eyes for precious seconds until she pushed him away. She pulled the door closed and cranked the engine.

He got down in the grass and he was crying as the Jeep rolled away, picking up speed. After ten seconds, the cornerlamps cut on—dim, orange light—and the noise of the engine became rackety across the prairie, sputtering and hacking.

Jack watched the approaching trucks, still moving toward him, getting louder as the Jeep dwindled away. No evident course diversion yet.

He glanced back into the depression, couldn't see his children.

When he looked forward again, the trucks were turning, all of them, and difficult to see now with their headlights blazing east.

He lay there watching the lights move across the plain, the engines becoming quiet, the lights fading.

Their Jeep disappeared.

The trucks vanished.

He had to strain now to even hear the engines.

Then he was lying on the ground, and there was no sound but the wind blowing through the grass. He lifted the shotgun and rose to his feet, started toward the depression. Couldn't see a thing under the cloud cover. He wouldn't have seen anything regardless, with the tears streaming down his face. He called out for his children in the darkness, and when they answered, he let their voices guide him.

In the rearview mirror, Dee watched the trio of headlights pursuing her. The temperature gauge was pegged, and in the Jeep's headlights, she could see streamers of smoke pouring out of the engine, smell things burning. Her leg throbbed, and she kept steady pressure on the gas pedal, trying to maintain her speed at twenty, but the engine had begun to lose power, cylinders misfiring, RPMs erratic, and still those trucks stayed with her, getting closer.

At 1.2 miles, the RPMs fell off and the engine seized, a violent clanging under the hood. Dee finally eased her foot off the accelerator, let the Jeep roll to a stop and die.

She turned the key back in the ignition.

Short of breath, her heart pounding.

The headlights of those trucks getting brighter in the rearview mirror, and the ominous symphony of their engines already audible.

She couldn't feel her leg, didn't know whether that was owing to the loss of blood flow or the adrenaline surging through her.

Her hands trembled as she lifted the guns out of her lap.

One of the trucks shot past, a hundred and fifty yards south, and kept going.

She turned around and looked back between the seats.

The other pair of headlights were motionless, a hundred feet back. They intensified, brights blazing into the Jeep for what seemed ages.

At last, she heard a series of distant door slams, and then the lights went dark.

Dee tossed the guns into the passenger seat and opened the center console, fingers probing until they grazed Ed's pocketknife. Her thumbnail found the indentation in the steel and she pried open the longest blade and sawed through the fabric of the shirt Jack had tied around her leg.

The feeling returned—a flood of needles and heat—and she reached down between her seat and the door until her hand touched the lever. As the seat

tilted back, the lights of the third truck appeared a quarter mile out through the windshield, moving in her direction.

She could hear voices now, and she could feel the blood spraying out of her, a warm pooling in her seat, the smell of iron filling the car. Already she was lightheaded and breathing fast and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Her arms slipped down to her sides and she was trying to find that day in Wyoming on the side of the mountain, but her thoughts kept tangling. As the footsteps approached she was so lightheaded she could barely think at all. Didn't want to go back into the past anyway.

And as flashlight beams swept across the Jeep, she landed upon the image she wanted, clinging to it as the dizziness behind her eyes began to spiral and echoing voices screamed at her to get out of the car.

Sunrise on a prairie.

Three figures—a man, a boy, a young woman.

Tired and cold.

They've walked all night, and they're still walking, just a few steps from the crest of a hill.

They reach the top.

Breathless.

The view goes on forever.

The man pulls his children close and points.

At first, they can't see what he's trying to show them, because the sun is exploding out of the horizon in radials of early light.

But as their eyes adjust, they see it—a city of white tents spread across the plain.

Thousands of them.

Numerous trails of smoke rise into the morning sky, and a band of soldiers have already seen them. They're climbing the hillside toward her family, hailing them, and one of their number carries a blue and white flag flapping in the wind.

She wants to follow them—she'd give anything—but they've already started down the hillside without her, slipping away now, and she loses them in the blinding light of the sun.

They'd been running in the dark for three minutes when Cole dug his heels into the ground.

“Come on,” Jack said, pulling his arm, “we aren't stopping.”

“We have to.”

Cole wouldn't move.

Jack let go of Naomi's hand and scooped the boy up in his arms and started jogging again.

Cole screamed, his arms flailing.

“Goddamnit, Cole—”

The boy grabbed his hair and tried to bite Jack’s face.

He dropped Cole into the grass.

“He’s turning into one of them,” Naomi screamed.

“Look at me, Cole.”

“We have to go back.” The boy was crying now.

“Why?”

“To get Mom.”

“Cole, we can’t go back. It’s too dangerous.”

“But it’s over.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The lights. They aren’t here anymore.” Jack knelt down in the grass, his boy just a shadow in the dark.

“Cole, this is not the time to screw around.”

“I’m not, Daddy. I don’t feel it anymore.”

“When did it go away?”

“Just now, while we were running. I can still feel it going out of me.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Cole.”

“You have to go get Mom. It’s okay now. The bad people won’t hurt you.”

Jack looked at his daughter.

“Go,” she said.

“Really?”

“If there’s even a chance, right?”

“Listen to me,” Jack said. “Do not move from this spot. It might be tomorrow morning before I come back, because I don’t think I’ll be able to find you in the dark.”

“What if you don’t come back?” she said.

“If I’m not back by mid-morning, you keep going north until you cross the border and find help. Cole, look at me.”

He held the boy’s hands. “If you’re wrong about this, you might never see me again. Do you understand that?”

The boy nodded. “But I’m not wrong.”

Jack ran across the prairie, tearing through the dark, his crumbling shoes flapping with every footfall, already gasping, no idea if he was headed in the right direction, and nothing to see but gaping blackness.

After five minutes, he stopped and bent over, his heart banging in his chest.

When he looked up again, he saw a cluster of red lights far across the plain. A further set of headlights. Over the rocketing of his pulse, he thought he heard the engines.

He was still gasping, realized he wasn’t going to



get his wind back, so he started running again, working up to as much of a sprint as he could manage. He was terrified the taillights would vanish, but they stayed put, didn't even seem to be moving away from him now.

Sweat ran into his eyes, and when he wiped the sting away, the lights had disappeared.

He stopped.

Didn't hear the engines anymore.

Just an ocean of soundless dark.

Seven flashes exploded through the black. For a fraction of a second, he saw Dee's Jeep and the three trucks surrounding it. Much closer than he thought, just a few hundred yards out. He was running again as the seven gunshots reached him and ripped his guts out, the last four hundred yards blazing past in a rush of terror, pain, and self-doubt, thinking he should have stayed with his children. He was going to see his wife dead and get himself killed, never see any of them again. And so close to safety, too.

He stopped twenty yards out from the vehicles, so far beyond the boundary of his endurance.

It sounded like sirens ringing inside his head, the darkness spinning.

He leaned over and puked into the grass.

Straightened up again, staggered past the trucks

toward the Jeep.

The driver side door had been thrown open, the stench of cordite strong in the air, and he was moving through a haze of smoke, waiting for the gunshots, the attack.

He stopped again when he saw them, not understanding what it meant, figuring he must be missing something, his brain failing to process information after he'd pushed himself so hard.

Had to count them twice.

Seven people sprawled in the grass around the Jeep. Each of them dead from a headshot, their guns lying within reach or still in hand.

In the light that spilled out of the Jeep, he saw the eighth member of the party crouched down against the right front wheel, tears streaming down his face, the long barrel of a large-caliber revolver jammed between his teeth. He wore a fleece vest and a cowboy hat, a patchy blond beard struggling to cover an acne-ruined face.

When he saw Jack, he pulled the gun out of his mouth.

"I can't do it," the man said. He offered Jack the gun. "Please."

"What?"

"Kill me."

Jack was still gasping for air, his legs burning. He reached forward, slowly, as if sudden movement might cause the young man to rethink his offer, then snatched the revolver out of his hand.

The man said, "Where are you going?" as Jack walked around the open door and looked into the Jeep.

"Oh God, baby."

The driver seat had been reclined and his wife lay stretched back on it, unmoving, her eyes closed, blood still running out of her leg.

"Dee."

He glanced down at her right leg, saw where the shirt he'd tied around her thigh had been severed.

He set the gun in the floorboard and reached in, taking up both ends of the bloody shirt sleeve and cinching it down even harder than before, until the blood stopped flowing.

"Dee." He touched her face. "Dee, wake up."

Outside, the man was crying, begging for Jack to end him.

Jack moved outside and around the door.

"Which of those trucks is yours?" he asked.

"Oh my God," the man cried. "Oh my God. My daughter. —"

Jack held the revolver to the man's knee. "Look at

me.”

The man looked up at him.

“My wife needs medical attention. Do you have keys to any of these trucks?”

The man pointed beyond the Jeep. “The Chevy. Here.” He dug a pair of keys out of his jeans, handed them to Jack.

“What happened?” the man said.

“What are you talking about?”

“To me.”

“I have no fucking idea.”

“You have to kill me. I can’t stand knowing what I—”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“Please—”

“But I will take your mind off it.”

Jack pulled the trigger and the man screamed, clutching his knee. Jack stood and walked around the car door. He shoved the revolver down the back of his jeans, leaned in, lifted his wife out of the pool of blood.

He was drenched in sweat, his legs trembling with exhaustion. Stumbled away from the Jeep with Dee in his arms and the young man pleading to die. It was all he could do to carry her those fifty feet to the pickup truck.

It was a pristine 1966 Chevy.

Powder blue.

He opened the passenger door and laid Dee across the vinyl, then limped around and hauled himself up into the cab.

The third key he tried started the engine.

He hit the lights, shifted into gear, floored the accelerator.

They raced across the prairie. He held her hand which was growing cold, saying her name over and over, an incantation. He had no idea if she even had a pulse, and still promising things he had no business promising—that they were almost over the border, almost to safety, where a city of tents awaited them, a refuge crawling with doctors who could fix her. She'd lost a lot of blood, but she was strong, had made it this far, she could surely hang on just a little farther, live to see the end of this and whatever new life they made, live to forget the worst of this, to see Na and Cole forget the worst of this, see her children grow up strong and happy, because they had so many more years the four of them, so many experiences to share that didn't involve running and death and fear, and please God darling, if any part of you can hear me, don't let this be the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
There will be no more death or mourning or  
crying or pain.

## **Revelations**

\* \* \* \* \*

THE team disbands as the light begins to fail. But she lingers in the pit, gently brushing the dirt from the ribcage of a skeleton she's just uncovered in the last hour, lost in her work. The distant hum of an airplane breaks her concentration, and she looks up into the sky—easy to see the twin-engine turboprop catching sunlight on its descent.

She climbs out of the pit and walks over to the showers. Pulls the curtain. Strips out of her boots, elbow-length rubber gloves, her clothes, and stands under the heavy spray of water, letting it pound away the reek of decomp.

In fresh, clean clothes, she starts across the field.

The airplane is parked in the distance, the cabin door beginning to open.

She breaks into a run.

The old man comes down the stairs of the plane already smiling, must have seen her as they taxied up.

Drops his bag as she runs into his arms, and they embrace for the first time in six months on the broken pavement of the runway.

“My angel,” he whispers. “My angel.”

When they come apart, she stares up at him, thinking, God, was his hair this white last Christmas? But he isn't looking at her. He's staring across the field, an intensity coalescing in his eyes.

“What's wrong?” she asks. “Daddy?”

He can barely speak, eyes shimmering with tears, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“This is the place.”

They cross the field, moving toward the pit.

“They pulled the trucks up to here,” he says. “A half dozen tractor trailers. There were tents set up over there,” he points, “right about where yours are. They told us there was hot food and beds waiting.” He stops. “Is that smell. . .?”

“Yeah.”

“Right about this time of day, too. Dusk. A beautiful sunset.” He continues walking, the stench growing worse with every step, until they stand at the edge of the grave.

She watches his face. He's somewhere else—nineteen years in the past.

“They lined us up right here,” he says. “They’d already dug the grave.”

“How many people do you think?”

“Maybe two hundred of us.” He closes his eyes, and she wonders what he sees, what he hears.

“Do you remember where you stood?”

He shakes his head. “I just remember the sounds and what the sky looked like, staring up at it through the bodies that had fallen on top of me.”

“Did they use chainsaws?”

He looks down at her, startled by the question.

“Yeah. How did you—”

“We were curious about how some of the bones had been bisected.”

The man eases himself down into the grass and she sits beside him.

“You’ve been down in the grave?” he asks.

“I worked in it all day. That’s what I do, Daddy.”

He chuckles. “You know I’m proud to death of you, angel, but Jesus do you have a fucked-up job.”

She leans her head against his shoulder, laces her fingers through his, twiddling the platinum band he now wears on the nub of his left ring finger.

The team builds a bonfire after supper.

Someone strums a guitar.



Someone rolls a joint.

A bottle makes the rounds.

She sits between the old man and Sam, the Australian team leader, feeling contemplative off two swigs of whiskey and staring into the flames. The cold of the night a wonderful contrast to the eddies of heat sliding up her bare legs.

Usually, those thirty days in hell are as unreachable as if they had happened to another family. But sometimes, like tonight, she feels plugged in to the raw emotion of it all, a closed circuit, and if she doesn't keep it at arm's length, it still has the power to break her.

Her father is a little drunk, Sam more so, and she tunes back in to their conversation as Sam loosens his tie and says, ". . .learning more about the Great Auroral Storm."

"Yeah, I've read some wild theories," her father says.

"You talking about mine?"

"Entirely possible. You really believe these auroras contributed to the epic massacres and extinctions in history?"

"I think there's some compelling solar abnormality data on that. But something of the magnitude that happened here? Keep in mind recorded human

history is just the blink of an eye since life crawled out of the oceans. This was a hundred-thousand-year occurrence. Maybe a five-hundred. Natural selection at its darkest.”

“So who got selected?” her father asks. “Who won? Us?”

Sam laughs. “No.”

“The affected?”

“Most of them selected themselves out when they committed mass suicide.”

“Then who?”

“Your son,” Sam says.

“Excuse me?”

“People like Cole. Those who witnessed that terrible light show on October Fourth, and either didn’t kill, or did, and resisted the crushing guilt. That’s who won.”

“I have a close friend back home in Belgium in the humanities department where I teach. A priest. He thinks the aurora was just God testing us.”

“Those who saw the aurora, or those who ran?”

“Both, Sam.”

“Well, it all comes down to purification in the end, right?”

“You say it like that’s a good thing.”

“On a human level, no, but in terms of our DNA, it’s

a different ball game. Remember, the barbarians finally took Rome. That was horrible, but Rome had become a corrupt, ineffectual, soft culture. Genetically speaking, it was a positive thing.”

“Or,” the old man says, “maybe we just need to kill each other. Maybe that’s our perfect state of being.”

Sam pauses to have a smoke, and when he finally exhales, says, “It surprises me that you would want to see this place again.”

“Why?”

“Because of what you saw and experienced here.”

“You should be examining my bones in that hole,” the old man says.

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“This was an awful place, no question, but a miracle happened here. I never want to forget that.”

She’s buzzed and getting tired. Stretches her bare feet toward the fire, lays her head in her father’s lap. Soon he’s running his fingers through her hair, still debating with Sam. She’s almost asleep when something vibrates against the back of her head.

“Excuse me, Sam,” her father says.

The old man reaches into his pocket and retrieves his mobile phone, answers, “I forgot, didn’t I? . . . I’m sorry. . . . Yes, here safe and sound, sitting by a fire. . . . Difficult but good. . . . Yes, I’m glad I came. . . . .”

That's still the plan. We'll meet you both in Calgary tomorrow evening. . . . . Oh, I know. It'll be so good to all be together again. . . . Yes, she's right here, but she's sleeping. . . . Okay, I'll tell her. . . . No, I won't forget. I'll do it as soon as we get off. . . . Goodnight, darling."

The old man slides his phone back into his pocket.

She's almost asleep now, in that cushioned bliss between consciousness and all that lies beneath. Feels her father's hand on her shoulder, and his breath, still after all these years, familiar against her ear.

"Naomi," he whispers, "your mother sends her love."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Read on for an interview with Blake Crouch and excerpts from his four novels, Desert Places, Locked Doors, Abandon, and Snowbound...*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Interview with Blake Crouch by Hank Wagner  
Originally Published in Crimespree, July 2009*

According to his website, Blake Crouch grew up in Statesville, a small town in the piedmont of North Carolina. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000, where he studied literature and creative writing. He currently resides in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado. Crouch's first book, *Desert Places*, was published in 2003. Pat Conroy called it "Harrowing, terrific, a whacked-out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy." Val McDermid described it as "An ingenious, diabolical debut that calls into question all our easy moral assumptions. *Desert Places* is a genuine thriller that pulses with adrenaline from start to finish." His second novel, *Locked Doors*, was published in July 2005. A sequel to *Desert Places*, it created a similar buzz. His third novel, *Abandon*, was published on July 7, 2009.

HANK WAGNER: Your writing career began in college?

BLAKE CROUCH: I started writing seriously in college. I had tinkered before, but the summer after my freshman year, I decided that I wanted to try to make a living at being a writer. Spring semester of 1999, I was in an intro creative writing class and I

wrote the short story (called “Ginsu Tony”) that would grow into *Desert Places*. Once I started my first novel, it became an obsession.

HW: Where did the original premise for *Desert Places* come from?

BC: The idea for *Desert Places* arose when two ideas crossed. I had the opening chapter already in my head... suspense writer receives an anonymous letter telling him there's a body buried on his property, covered in his blood. I didn't know where my protagonist was going to be taken though. Around the same time, I happened to be glancing through a scrapbook that had photographs of this backpacking trip I took in Wyoming in the mid 90's. One of those photographs was of a road running off into the horizon in the midst of a vast desert. My brain started working. What if my protagonist is taken to a cabin out in the middle of nowhere, by a psychopath? What if this cabin is in this vast desert, and he has no hope of escape? That photograph broke the whole story open for me.

HW: Why a sequel for your second book? Affection for the characters?

BC: It was actually my editor's idea. I was perfectly happy walking away from the first book. But once she mentioned it during the editing of *Desert Places*, I really started to think about where the story could go, wondered how Andy might have changed after seven years in hiding, and I got excited about doing it. And I'm very glad I did, because I would've missed those characters. Even my psychopaths are family in some strange, twisted way.

HW: Of all the reviews and comments about your books, what was the strangest? The meanest? The nicest? The most perceptive?

BC: The strangest: This was a comment about me and the reviewer wrote something to the effect that I was either a super-talented writer with an immense imagination or one sick puppy. I think that's open to debate. The meanest: From those [expletive deleted] at Kirkus. Now, keep in mind, this is my first taste of reviews and the reviewer absolutely savaged my book. It was so mean it was funny... although I didn't see the humor for some time. The review ended, "Sadly, a sequel is in the works." The nicest: That's hard to choose from. I particularly loved the

review for *Locked Doors* that appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*. The reviewer wrote, and this is my favorite quote thus far, "If you don't think you'll enjoy seeing how Crouch makes the torture and disembowelment of innocent women, children and even lax store employees into a thing of poetic beauty, maybe you should go watch *Sponge Bob*." The most perceptive: The reviews that recognize that I'm trying to make a serious exploration of the human psyche, the nature of evil, and man's depravity are the ones that please me the most.

HW: Do you strive for realism in your writing, or do you try more to entertain?

BC: First and foremost, I want to entertain. I want the reader to close the book thinking, "that was a helluva story." Beyond that, I do strive for realism. I want the reader to identify with my characters' emotions, whether it's fear, sadness, or happiness. The places I write about, from the Yukon to the Outer Banks to the Colorado mountains are rendered accurately, and that's very important to me, because I want the reader to have the benefit of visiting these beautiful places in my books.



HW: The villain in *Locked Doors* seems almost a force of nature, cunning, instinctively brilliant when it comes to creating mayhem. Do you worry that readers might write him off as unrealistic?

BC: I decided to approach Luther Kite a little differently than my bad guy, Orson Thomas, in *Desert Places*. In the first book, I tried to humanize Orson, to gin up sympathy by explaining what happened in his childhood to turn him into this monster. With Luther et al., I made a conscious decision not to delve into any of that, and for this reason I think he comes off as almost mythic, larger than life, maybe with even a tinge of the supernatural. I don't worry that readers will find him unrealistic, because I didn't try to make him like your typical realistic humdrum villain. What I want is for readers to fear him.

HW: What's the most important thing a book has to do to keep YOUR attention?

BC: It's actually very simple... a great story told through great writing. I don't care if it's western, horror, thriller, historical, romance, or literary. I just want to know that I'm in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing.

HW: Who are your literary heroes?

BC: I grew up on southern writers -- Walker Percy, Pat Conroy -- the fantasy of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In college I discovered Thomas Harris, Dennis Lehane, James Lee Burke, Caleb Carr, and my favorite writer, Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy just blows me away. His prose is so rich. He is unlike anyone else out there today. His 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, in my opinion, is the greatest horror novel ever written.

HW: What makes *Blood Meridian* “the greatest horror novel ever written?”

BC: The writing is mind blowing. The violence (which occurs frequently and in vivid detail) rises to the level of poetry in McCarthy's hands. And the story is fascinating. It's based on historical fact and follows a bloodthirsty gang through the Mexico-Texas Borderlands in the mid-1800's, who have been hired by the Mexican government to collect as many Indian scalps as they can. I read *Blood Meridian* every year.

HW: Reading *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors*,

it seems that you're drawn to the horrific. The books are filled with horrific acts, and with terrifying set pieces, as in the descent into the Kites' basement in *Locked Doors*. Did the horror genre hold any attraction to you growing up?

BC: I honestly didn't read a lot of horror growing up, but I always loved the sensation of fear produced by a scary movie or a great book. Some of my first short fiction (written in middle school) could be classified as horror. In fact, there's a short story on my website called "In Shock" that I wrote in the 8th grade.

HW: Might there be a sequel to *Locked Doors* someday?

BC: Midway through the writing of *Locked Doors*, it occurred to me the story might be a trilogy. I may finish out the trilogy at some point. I'm starting to miss my characters (the ones that survived), and I have a feeling that I will return to the world of *Locked Doors* at some point in the future to check in on them. We'll have to see.

HW: Your latest novel, *Abandon*, is set in Colorado, where you've lived for the past six years.

Did you intend to write a novel set in that state when you moved there, or did your surroundings inspire you to?

BC: This was definitely a case of my surroundings inspiring me. Two months after we moved from North Carolina to Durango, we had some friends come out to visit. My wife and I took them on a backpacking trip into the San Juans, and it was on this trip that I first saw the ruins of a mining town—Sneffels, Colorado and the Camp Bird Mine. It made a huge impression, the idea of living in these extreme conditions, particularly in winter. The claustrophobia, the desperation, the kind of people who would subject themselves to such a life fascinated me.

HW: Did you have any particular goals in mind when you embarked on this project? Did they change as you worked? Do you think you met your goals?

BC: The idea of writing a “mining town thriller” was with me for a long time, as early as the summer of 2003, before *Desert Places* was published. Initially, I thought it would all be set in the past, a straight historical. Then in ‘05, while on tour for *Locked Doors*, I had a sudden realization that this was the story I

needed to write, and that it wasn't just historical. There would be present scenes, too, and the mystery at the heart of the book would be the mass disappearance of the town. My goal was to write a book that I would want to read, and in that regard, I think I succeeded.

HW: How long did it take to prepare to write the book? How much research was involved? Do you research first, then write, or answer the questions that arise as you dive into the writing?

BC: I started outlining in the fall of '05, and finalized the book with my editor in the summer '07. There were 7 drafts, and tons of research, which occurred at all stages of the writing.

HW: Was it tough striking a balance between writing a thriller and the urge to display all your newfound knowledge? Any fascinating tidbits that didn't go into the book that you want to share with readers?

BC: Lots of stuff got cut, and some of it was wonderful (and it still pains me to have let it go) but in the end, it was all about what advanced the story. For

instance, there was an Irishman who lived in one of the Colorado mining towns, and the love of his life had died on their wedding night some years prior. Every night, from his cabin above town, the sound of a violin would sweep down the mountain. Mournful, beautiful music. The town got used to hearing it. One night, after the violin went silent, a single gunshot echoed from the cabin. The townsfolk went up and found him dead, with a note asking to be buried with his wife. I loved that bit, wanted to put this guy into the story, but it didn't belong, so I had to let it go.

HW: Your first two books followed the adventures of basically the same cast of characters. Was it a relief or was it scary to move on to a whole new set of players?

BC: Both a total relief and completely terrifying. But what's worse than the fear of doing something new and challenging is realizing one day that you're in a rut, that you've essentially written the same book again and again.

HW: Your first two books could be described as pure, relentless adrenaline. In fact, those are your words. Was it difficult to work on a novel taking place

in two different times, switching back and forth between the two? How about working with a larger cast? Did that present you with any particular challenges, issues, problems?

BC: It was hard at first, but once I got into the flow of both narratives, it wasn't such a big deal to go back and forth, which is the way I wrote it. It sounds silly, but I wrote the present in one font, the past in another, and for some reason, changing fonts helped me to get back into whatever section I was working on. This cast of characters, which I knew was going to be big going in, was intimidating starting out. I spent a month on character studies, really getting to know each main character and their back-story before I dove into the book, and I think (I hope) that made all the difference.

HW: Has having children changed the way you look at your writing? Your subject matter? Do you ever pause and think, I guess my kids won't be able to read that until they're older?

BC: *Abandon* was the first thing I wrote after my son was born, and being a father for the first time and that new relationship and life-altering love couldn't help but find its way into this work. Parent-child

relationships definitely constitute a significant aspect of *Abandon*. And yeah, there's no way my kids will be able to read my first two books until they're at least seven or eight (kidding).

HW: Who is your first reader?

BC: My wife.

HW: What's your favorite procrastination technique to avoid writing?

BC: Playing my acoustic guitar.

HW: Now that you're in the business, do you find as much time to read as before? Do you avoid fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone's stories?

BC: I read more now than ever. You have to. I've never avoided fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone else's stories. You can't help but be influenced by the work of others. No one is unique. As Cormac McCarthy said, "The sad truth is that books are made of other books."

HW: I happen to know you've written an essay



about Jack Ketchum's Off Season for the upcoming International Thrillers Writers project *Thrillers: 100 Must Reads*. Was that format difficult for you? Did the experience provide you with any special insights into your own writings, or into thrillers in general?

BC: It was the hardest thing I'd written all year. I felt like I was in college again working on a term paper. That being said, it was a great joy to delve into the life and work of Jack Ketchum. I had great editors on that project. (HW: Full disclosure time: the editors for that worthy project are the esteemed David Morrell and yours truly. End of plug.)

HW: Tell us a little about future projects. You have a short story slated to appear in the ITW anthology, *Thrillers 2*?

BC: Yep, it's called "Remaking" and also happens to be set in a beautiful Colorado town called Ouray. It's premised on a question: What would you do if you were in a coffee shop, saw a man sitting with a young boy, and suspected the boy wasn't supposed to be with him, that maybe he'd been kidnapped. I'm over the moon and humbled to be included in such a stellar collection of writers. Joe Konrath and I have just

released a free short story as an eBook with the help of our publishers. It's kind of groundbreaking, both in how Joe and I collaborated, and how our publishers came together to make it available everywhere. It's called "Serial", and is probably the most twisted thing either of us have ever written. The *Abandon* audiobook will have a short story that I read called "On the Good, Red Road," and finally Jen Jordan's new anthology, *Uncage Me*, publishes in July, and I have a story in that one called "\*69."

HW: Are you working on a new novel at the moment?

BC: I am.

HW: Where are you in that process?

BC: About a hundred pages in.

HW: Can you talk a little about the new book, or would that jinx things?

BC: I'm pretty sure I would deeply regret talking about it at this point. I find if I talk too much about works-in-progress, it takes the wind out of my sails.

HW: Any book recommendations?

BC: Joe Konrath just published a novel under the name Jack Kilborn. It's called *Afraid*, and I think it's one of the best pieces of horror fiction to come out in recent memory.

HW: Work uniform?

BC: A white tee-shirt and pajama bottoms with snowflakes on them. I know, it's awful.

HW: Misconceptions about people who graduated from UNC?

BC: That if by some rip in the space-time continuum, Al-Qaeda managed to get a Division I college basketball team together, and if that team somehow made it to the NCAA tournament, and then survived March Madness, and, now here's a real stretch, were facing Duke in the championship game on Monday night, that UNC fans would put aside their petty rivalry and root for Duke over the terrorists.

\* \* \* \* \*

## DESERT PLACES

*Published in January 2004 by Thomas Dunne*

*Books*

**DESCRIPTION:** Andrew Z. Thomas is a successful writer of suspense thrillers, living the dream at his lake house in the piedmont of North Carolina. One afternoon in late spring, he receives a bizarre letter that eventually threatens his career, his sanity, and the lives of everyone he loves. A murderer is designing his future, and for the life of him, Andrew can't get away.

Harrowing...terrific...a whacked out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy.

**PAT CONROY**

[C]arried by rich, image-filled prose. Crouch will handcuff you, blindfold you, throw you in the trunk of a car, and drag you kicking and screaming through a story so intense, so emotionally packed, that you will walk away stunned.

**WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL**

*Excerpt from Desert Places...*

On a lovely May evening, I sat on my deck, watching the sun descend upon Lake Norman. So far, it had been a perfect day. I'd risen at 5:00 a.m. as I always do, put on a pot of French roast, and prepared my usual breakfast of scrambled eggs and a bowl of fresh pineapple. By six o'clock, I was writing, and I didn't stop until noon. I fried two white crappies I'd caught the night before, and the moment I sat down for lunch, my agent called. Cynthia fields my messages when I'm close to finishing a book, and she had several for me, the only one of real importance being that the movie deal for my latest novel, Blue Murder, had closed. It was good news of course, but two other movies had been made from my books, so I was used to it by now.

I worked in my study for the remainder of the afternoon and quit at 6:30. My final edits of the new as yet untitled manuscript would be finished tomorrow. I was tired, but my new thriller, The Scorcher, would be on bookshelves within the week. I savored the exhaustion that followed a full day of work. My hands sore from typing, eyes dry and strained, I shut down the computer and rolled back from the desk in my swivel chair.

I went outside and walked up the long gravel drive

toward the mailbox. It was the first time I'd been out all day, and the sharp sunlight burned my eyes as it squeezed through the tall rows of loblollies that bordered both sides of the drive. It was so quiet here. Fifteen miles south, Charlotte was still gridlocked in rush-hour traffic, and I was grateful not to be a part of that madness. As the tiny rocks crunched beneath my feet, I pictured my best friend, Walter Lancing, fuming in his Cadillac. He'd be cursing the drone of horns and the profusion of taillights as he inched away from his suite in uptown Charlotte, leaving the quarterly nature magazine *Hiker* to return home to his wife and children. Not me, I thought, the solitary one.

For once, my mailbox wasn't overflowing. Two envelopes lay inside, one a bill, the other blank except for my address typed on the outside. Fan mail.

Back inside, I mixed myself a Jack Daniel's and Sun-Drop and took my mail and a book on criminal pathology out onto the deck. Settling into a rocking chair, I set everything but my drink on a small glass table and gazed down to the water. My backyard is narrow, and the woods flourish a quarter mile on either side, keeping my home of ten years in isolation from my closest neighbors. Spring had not come this year until mid-April, so the last of the pink and white dogwood blossoms still specked the variably green

interior of the surrounding forest. Bright grass ran down to a weathered gray pier at the water's edge, where an ancient weeping willow sagged over the bank, the tips of its branches dabbling in the surface of the water.

The lake is more than a mile wide where it touches my property, making houses on the opposite shore visible only in winter, when the blanket of leaves has been stripped from the trees. So now, in the thick of spring, branches thriving with baby greens and yellows, the lake was mine alone, and I felt like the only living soul for miles around.

I put my glass down half-empty and opened the first envelope. As expected, I found a bill from the phone company, and I scrutinized the lengthy list of calls. When I'd finished, I set it down and lifted the lighter envelope. There was no stamp, which I thought strange, and upon slicing it open, I extracted a single piece of white paper and unfolded it. In the center of the page, one paragraph had been typed in black ink:

**Greetings. There is a body buried on your property, covered in your blood. The unfortunate young lady's name is Rita Jones. You've seen this missing schoolteacher's face on the news, I'm sure. In her jeans pocket you'll find a slip of**

**paper with a phone number on it. You have one day to call that number. If I have not heard from you by 8:00 p.m. tomorrow (5/17), the Charlotte Police Department will receive an anonymous phone call. I'll tell them where Rita Jones is buried on Andrew Thomas's lakefront property, how he killed her, and where the murder weapon can be found in his house. (I do believe a paring knife is missing from your kitchen.) I hope for your sake I don't have to make that call. I've placed a property marker on the grave site. Just walk along the shoreline toward the southern boundary of your property and you'll find it. I strongly advise against going to the police, as I am always watching you.**

A smile edged across my lips. I even chuckled to myself. Because my novels treat crime and violence, my fans often have a demented sense of humor. I've received death threats, graphic artwork, even notes from people claiming to have murdered in the same fashion as the serial killers in my books. But I'll save this, I thought. I couldn't remember one so original.

I read it again, but a premonitory twinge struck me the second time, particularly because the author had



some knowledge regarding the layout of my property. And a paring knife was, in fact, missing from my cutlery block. Carefully refolding the letter, I

slipped it into the pocket of my khakis and walked down the steps toward the lake.

As the sun cascaded through the hazy sky, beams of light drained like spilled paint across the western horizon. Looking at the lacquered lake suffused with deep orange, garnet, and magenta, I stood by the shore for several moments, watching two sunsets collide.

Against my better judgment, I followed the shoreline south and was soon tramping through a noisy bed of leaves. I'd gone an eighth of a mile when I stopped. At my feet, amid a coppice of pink flowering mountain laurel, I saw a miniature red flag attached to a strip of rusted metal thrust into the ground. The flag fluttered in a breeze that curled off the water. This has to be a joke, I thought, and if so, it's a damn good one.

As I brushed away the dead leaves that surrounded the marker, my heart began to pound. The dirt beneath the flag was packed, not crumbly like undisturbed soil. I even saw half a footprint when I'd swept all the leaves away.

I ran back to the house and returned with a shovel.

Because the soil had previously been unearthed, I dug easily through the first foot and a half, directly below where the marker had been placed. At two feet, the head of the shovel stabbed into something soft. My heart stopped. Throwing the shovel aside, I dropped to my hands and knees and clawed through the dirt. A rotten stench enveloped me, and as the hole deepened, the smell grew more pungent.

My fingers touched flesh. I drew my hand back in horror and scrambled away from the hole. Rising to my feet, I stared down at a coffee brown ankle, barely showing through the dirt. The odor of rot overwhelmed me, so I breathed only through my mouth as I took up the shovel again.

When the corpse was completely exposed, and I saw what a month of putrefaction could do to a human face, I vomited into the leaves. I kept thinking that I should have the stomach for this because I write about it. Researching the grisly handiwork of serial killers, I'd studied countless mutilated cadavers. But I had never smelled a human being decomposing in the ground, or seen how insects teem in the moist cavities.

I composed myself, held my hand over my mouth and nose, and peered again into the hole. The face was unrecognizable, but the body was undoubtedly

that of a short black female, thick in the legs, plump through the torso. She wore a formerly white shirt, now marred with blood and dirt, the fabric rent over much of the chest, primarily in the vicinity of her heart. Jean shorts covered her legs down to the knees. I got back down on all fours, held my breath, and reached for one of her pockets. Her legs were mushy and turgid, and I had great difficulty forcing my hand into the tight jeans. Finding nothing in the first pocket, I stepped across the hole and tried the other. Sticking my hand inside it, I withdrew a slip of paper from a fortune cookie and fell back into the leaves, gasping for clean lungfuls of air. On one side, I saw the phone number; on the other: "you are the only flower of meditation in the wilderness."

In five minutes, I'd reburied the body and the marker. I took a small chunk of granite from the shore and placed it on the thicketed grave site. Then I returned to the house. It was quarter to eight, and there was hardly any light left in the sky.

Two hours later, sitting on the sofa in my living room, I dialed the number on the slip of paper. Every door to the house was locked, most of the lights turned on, and in my lap, a cold satin stainless .357 revolver.

I had not called the police for a very good reason. The claim that it was my blood on the woman was probably a lie, but the paring knife had been missing from my kitchen for weeks. Also, with the Charlotte Police Department's search for Rita Jones dominating local news headlines, her body on my property, murdered with my knife, possibly with my fingerprints on it, would be more than sufficient evidence to indict me. I'd researched enough murder trials to know that.

As the phone rang, I stared up at the vaulted ceiling of my living room, glanced at the black baby grand piano I'd never learned to play, the marble fireplace, the odd artwork that adorned the walls. A woman named Karen, whom I'd dated for nearly two years, had convinced me to buy half a dozen pieces of art from a recently deceased minimalist from New York, a man who signed his work "Loman." I hadn't initially taken to Loman, but Karen had promised me I'd eventually "get" him. Now, \$27,000 and one fiancée lighter, I stared at the ten-by-twelve-foot abomination that hung above the mantel: shit brown on canvas, with a basketball-size yellow sphere in the upper right-hand corner. Aside from Brown No. 2, four similar marvels of artistic genius pockmarked other walls of my home, but these I could suffer. Mounted on the wall

at the foot of the staircase, it was Playtime, the twelve-thousand-dollar glass-encased heap of stuffed animals, sewn together in an orgiastic conglomeration, which reddened my face even now. But I smiled, and the knot that had been absent since late winter shot a needle of pain through my gut. My Karen ulcer. You're still there. Still hurting me. At least it's you.

The second ring.

I peered up the staircase that ascended to the exposed second-floor hallway, and closing my eyes, I recalled the party I'd thrown just a week ago-guests laughing, talking politics and books, filling up my silence. I saw a man and a woman upstairs, elbows resting against the oak banister, overlooking the living room, the wet bar, and the kitchen. Holding their wineglasses, they waved down to me, smiling at their host.

The third ring.

My eyes fell on a photograph of my mother-a five-by-seven in a stained-glass frame, sitting atop the obsidian piano. She was the only family member with whom I maintained regular contact. Though I had relatives in the Pacific Northwest, Florida, and a handful in the Carolinas, I saw them rarely-at reunions, weddings, or funerals that my mother shamed me into

attending with her. But with my father having passed away and a brother I hadn't seen in thirteen years, family meant little to me. My friends sustained me, and contrary to popular belief, I didn't have the true reclusive spirit imputed to me. I did need them.

In the photograph, my mother is squatting down at my father's grave, pruning a tuft of carmine cannalilies in the shadow of the headstone. But you can only see her strong, kind face among the blossoms, intent on tidying up her husband's plot of earth under that magnolia he'd taught me to climb, the blur of its waxy green leaves behind her.

The fourth ring.

"Did you see the body?"

It sounded as if the man were speaking through a towel. There was no emotion or hesitation in his staccato voice.

"Yes."

"I gutted her with your paring knife and hid the knife in your house. It has your fingerprints all over it." He cleared his throat. "Four months ago, you had blood work done by Dr. Xu. They misplaced a vial. You remember having to go back and give more?"

"Yes."

"I stole that vial. Some is on Rita Jones's white T-shirt. The rest is on the others."

“What others?”

“I make a phone call, and you spend the rest of your life in prison, possibly death row....”

“I just want you-”

“Shut your mouth. You’ll receive a plane ticket in the mail. Take the flight. Pack clothes, toiletries, nothing else. You spent last summer in Aruba. Tell your friends you’re going again.”

“How did you know that?”

“I know many things, Andrew.”

“I have a book coming out,” I pleaded. “I’ve got readings scheduled. My agent-”

“Lie to her.”

“She won’t understand me just leaving like this.”

“Fuck Cynthia Mathis. You lie to her for your safety, because if I even suspect you’ve brought someone along or that someone knows, you’ll go to jail or you’ll die. One or the other, guaranteed. And I hope you aren’t stupid enough to trace this number. I promise you it’s stolen.”

“How do I know I won’t be hurt?”

“You don’t. But if I get off the phone with you and I’m not convinced you’ll be on that flight, I’ll call the police tonight. Or I may visit you while you’re sleeping. You’ve got to put that Smith and Wesson away sometime.”

I stood up and spun around, the gun clenched in my sweaty hands. The house was silent, though chimes on the deck were clanging in a zephyr. I looked through the large living room windows at the black lake, its wind-rippled surface reflecting the pier lights. The blue light at the end of Walter's pier shone out across the water from a distant inlet. His "Gatsby light," we called it. My eyes scanned the grass and the edge of the trees, but it was far too dark to see anything in the woods.

"I'm not in the house," he said. "Sit down."

I felt something well up inside of me—anger at the fear, rage at this injustice.

"Change of plan," I said. "I'm going to hang up, dial nine one one, and take my chances. You can go—"

"If you aren't motivated by self-preservation, there's an old woman named Jeanette I could—"

"I'll kill you."

"Sixty-five, lives alone, I think she'd love the company. What do you think? Do I have to visit your mother to show you I'm serious? What is there to consider? Tell me you'll be on that plane, Andrew. Tell me so I don't have to visit your mother tonight."

"I'll be on that plane."

The phone clicked, and he was gone.



## LOCKED DOORS

*Published July 2005 by Thomas Dunne Books*

**DESCRIPTION:** Seven years ago, suspense novelist Andrew Thomas's life was shattered when he was framed for a series of murders. The killer's victims were unearthed on Andrew's lakefront property, and since he was wanted by the FBI, Andrew had no choice but to flee and to create a new identity. Andrew does just that in a cabin tucked away in the remote wilderness near Haines Junction, Yukon. His only link to society is by e-mail, through which he learns that all the people he ever loved are being stalked and murdered. Culminating in the spooky and secluded Outer Banks of North Carolina, the paths of Andrew Thomas, a psychotic named Luther Kite, and a young female detective collide. *Locked Doors* is a novel of blistering suspense that will scare you to death.

Crouch quite simply is a marvel. *Locked Doors* is as good as anything I've read all year, a stay-up-all-night thriller that will have you chewing your fingers down to the nub even as you're reading its last

paragraph. Highest possible recommendation.

## **BOOKREPORTER**

Palpable suspense. Non-stop action. Relentless and riveting. Blake Crouch is the most exciting new thriller writer I've read in years.

**DAVID MORRELL**

*Excerpt from Locked Doors...*

The headline on the Arts and Leisure page read: Publisher to Reissue Five Thrillers by Alleged Murderer Andrew Z. Thomas.

All it took was seeing his name.

Karen Prescott dropped The New York Times and walked over to the window.

Morning light streamed across the clutter of her cramped office--query letters and sample chapters stacked in two piles on the floor beside the desk, a box of galleys shoved under the credenza. She peered out the window and saw the fog dissolving, the microscopic crawl of traffic now materializing on Broadway through the cloud below.

Leaning against a bookcase that housed many of the hardcovers she'd guided to publication, Karen shivered. The mention of Andrew's name always

unglued her.

For two years she'd been romantically involved with the suspense novelist and had even lived with him during the writing of *Blue Murder* at the same lake house in North Carolina where many of his victims were found.

She considered it a latent character defect that she'd failed to notice anything sinister in Andy beyond a slight reclusive tendency.

My God, I almost married him.

She pictured Andy reading to the crowd in that Boston bookshop the first time they met. In a bathrobe writing in his office as she brought him fresh coffee (French roast, of course). Andy making love to her in a flimsy rowboat in the middle of Lake Norman.

She thought of his dead mother.

The exhumed bodies from his lakefront property.

His face on the FBI website.

They'd used his most recent jacket photo, a black-and-white of Andy in a sports jacket sitting broodingly at the end of his pier.

During the last few years she'd stopped thinking of him as Andy. He was Andrew Thomas now and embodied all the horrible images the cadence of those four syllables invoked.

There was a knock.

Scott Boylin, publisher of Ice Blink Press's literary imprint, stood in the doorway dressed in his best bib and tucker. Karen suspected he was gussied up for the Doubleday party.

He smiled, waved with his fingers.

She crossed her arms, leveled her gaze.

God, he looked streamlined today--very tall, fit, crowned by thick black hair with dignified intimations of silver.

He made her feel little. In a good way. Because Karen stood nearly six feet tall, few men towered over her. She loved having to look up at Scott.

They'd been dating clandestinely for the last four months. She'd even given him a key to her apartment, where they spent countless Sundays in bed reading manuscripts, the coffee-stained pages scattered across the sheets.

But last night she'd seen him at a bar in SoHo with one of the cute interns. Their rendezvous did not look work-related.

"Come to the party with me," he said. "Then we'll go to Il Piazza. Talk this out. It's not what you--"

"I've got tons of reading to catch up--"

"Don't be like that, Karen. Come on."

"I don't think it's appropriate to have this conversation here, so . . ."

He exhaled sharply through his nose and the door closed hard behind him.

Joe Mack was stuffing his pink round face with a gyro when his cell phone started ringing to the tune of "Staying Alive."

He answered, cheeks exploding with food, "This Joe."

"Hi, yes, um, I've got a bit of an interesting problem."

"Whath?"

"Well, I'm in my apartment, but I can't get the deadbolt to turn from the inside."

Joe Mack choked down a huge mouthful, said, "So you're locked in."

"Exactly."

"Which apartment?" He didn't even try to mask the annoyance in his voice.

"Twenty-two eleven."

"Name?"

"Um . . . I'm not the tenant. I'm Karen Prescott's friend. She's the--"

"Yeah, I get it. You need to leave anytime soon?"

"Well, yeah, I don't want to--"

Joe Mack sighed, closed the cell phone, and devoured the last of the gyro.

Wiping his hands on his shirt, he heaved himself from a debilitated swivel chair and lumbered out of the office, locking the door behind him.

The lobby was quiet for midday and the elevator doors spread as soon as he pressed the button. He rode up wishing he'd bought three gyros for lunch instead of two.

The doors opened again and he walked onto the twenty-second floor, fishing the key ring containing the master from the pocket of his enormous overalls.

He belched.

It echoed down the empty corridor.

Man, was he hungry.

He stopped at 2211, knocked, yelled through the door, "It's the super!"

No one answered.

Joe Mack inserted the master into the deadbolt. It turned easily enough.

He pushed the door open.

"Hello?" he said, standing in the threshold, admiring the apartment--roomy, flat-screen television, lush deep blue carpet, an antique desk, great view of SoHo, probably loads of food in the fridge.

"Anybody home?"

He turned the deadbolt four times. It worked perfectly.

Another door opened somewhere in the hallway and approaching footsteps reverberated off the hardwood floor. Joe Mack glanced down the corridor at the tall man with black hair in a black overcoat strolling toward him from the stairwell.

“Hey, pal, were you the one who just called me?” Joe Mack asked.

The man with black hair stopped at the open doorway of 2211.

He smelled strange, of Windex and lemons.

“Yes, I was the one.”

“Oh. You get the lock to work?”

“I’ve never been in this apartment.”

“What the fuck did you call me for--”

Glint of a blade. The man held an ivory-hilted bowie. He swept its shimmering point across Joe Mack’s swollen belly, cleaving denim, cotton, several layers of skin.

“No, wait just a second--”

The man raised his right leg and booted Joe Mack through the threshold.

The super toppled backward as the man followed him into the apartment, slammed the door, and shot the deadbolt home.

Karen left Ice Blink Press at 6:30 p.m. and

emerged into a manic Manhattan evening, the sliver of sky between the buildings smoldering with dying sunlight, gilding glass and steel. It was the fourth Friday of October, the terminal brilliance of autumn full blown upon the city, and as she walked the fifteen blocks to her apartment in SoHo, Karen decided that she wouldn't start the manuscript in her leather satchel tonight.

Instead she'd slip into satin pajamas, have a glass of that organic chardonnay she'd purchased at Whole Foods Market, and watch wonderful mindless television.

It had been a bad week.

Pampering was in order.

At 7:55 she walked out of her bedroom in black satin pajamas that rubbed coolly against her skin. Her chaotic blond hair was twisted into a bun and held up by chopsticks from the Chinese food she'd ordered. Two unopened food cartons and a bottle of wine sat on the glass coffee table between the couch and the flat-screen television. Her apartment smelled of spicy-sweet sesame beef.

She plopped down and uncorked the wine.

Ashley Chambliss's CD *Nakedsongs* had ended and in the perfect stillness of her apartment Karen



conceded how alone she was.

Thirty-seven.

Single again.

Childless.

But I'm not lonely, she thought, turning on the television and pouring a healthy glass of chardonnay.

I'm just alone.

There is a difference.

After watching Dirty Dancing, Karen treated herself to a soak. She'd closed the bathroom door and a Yankee candle that smelled of cookie dough sat burning in a glass jar on the sink, the projection of its restless flame flickering on the sweaty plaster walls.

Karen rubbed her long muscular legs together, slippery with bath oil. Imagining another pair of legs sliding between her own, she shut her eyes, moved her hands over her breasts, nipples swelling, then up and down her thighs.

The phone was ringing in the living room.

She wondered if Scott Boylin was calling to apologize. Wine encouraged irrational forgiveness in Karen. She even wished Scott were in the bathtub with her. She could feel the memory of his water-softened feet gliding up her smooth shinbones. Maybe she'd call and invite him over. Give him that

chance to explain. He'd be back from the Doubleday party.

Now someone was knocking at the front door.

Karen sat up, blew back the bubbles that had amassed around her head.

Lifting her wineglass by the stem, she finished it off. Then she rose out of the water, took her white terrycloth bathrobe that lay draped across the toilet seat, and stepped unsteadily from the tub onto the mosaic tile. She'd nearly polished off the entire bottle of chardonnay and a warm and pleasant gale was raging in her head.

Karen crossed the living room, heading toward the front door.

She failed to notice that the cartons of steamed rice and sesame beef were gone, or that a large gray trashcan now stood between the television and the antique desk she'd inherited from her grandmother.

She peeked through the peephole.

A young man stood in the hallway holding an enormous bouquet of ruby red roses.

She smiled, turned the deadbolt, opened the door.

"I have a delivery for Karen Prescott."

"That's me."

The delivery man handed over the gigantic vase.

"Wait here. I'll get you your tip." She slurred her

words a little.

“No ma’am, it’s been taken care of.” He gave her a small salute and left.

She relocked the door and carried the roses over to the kitchen counter. They were magnificent and they burgeoned from the cut-glass vase. She plucked the small card taped to the glass and opened it. The note read simply:

***Look in the coat closet***

Karen giggled. Scott was one hundred percent forgiven. Maybe she’d even do that thing he always asked for tonight.

She buried her nose in a rose, inhaled the damp sweet perfume. Then she cinched the belt of her bathrobe and walked over to the closet behind the couch, pulling open the door with a big smile that instantly died.

A naked man with black hair and a pale face peered down at her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and swallowed.

The cartons of leftover Chinese food stood between his feet.

She stared into his black eyes, a coldness spreading through her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she said.

The man grinned, his member rising.

Karen bolted for the front door, but as she reached to unhook the chain he snatched a handful of her wet hair and swung her back into a mirror that shattered on the adjacent wall.

“Please,” she whimpered.

He punched her in the face.

Karen sank down onto the floor in bits of glass, anesthetized by wine and fear. Watching his bare feet, she wondered where her body would be found and by whom and in what condition.

He grabbed her hair into a ball with one hand and lifted her face out of the glass, the tiniest shards having already embedded themselves in her cheek.

He swung down.

She felt the dull thud of his knuckles crack her jaw, decided to feign unconsciousness.

He hit her again.

She didn’t have to.

\* \* \* \* \*

ABANDON

*Published July 2009 by Minotaur Books*

**DESCRIPTION:** On Christmas Day in 1893, every man, woman and child in a remote mining town will disappear, belongings forsaken, meals left to freeze in vacant cabins, and not a single bone will be found--not even the gold that was rumored to have been the pride of this town will be found either. One hundred and thirteen years later, two backcountry guides are hired by a leading history professor and his journalist daughter to lead them into the abandoned mining town to learn what happened. This has been done once before but the people that went in did not come out. With them is a psychic and a paranormal photographer--the town is rumored to be haunted. They've come to see a ghost town, but what they're about to discover is that twenty miles from civilization, with a blizzard bearing down, they are not alone, and the past is very much alive....

Crouch does a great job of pacing, going back and forth between the two stories and the two time periods. The characters are authentic and interesting. He keeps up the suspense until the very end. It's a great book. Crouch is a great writer. Go and get it.

**TORONTO SUN**

*In Abandon*, Crouch blends elements of modern-

day Colorado with its violent and storied past to create a tapestry of love, greed and revenge... unforgettable.

**JOHN HART**

*Excerpt from Abandon...*

Thursday, December 28, 1893

Wind rips through the crags a thousand feet above, nothing moving in this godforsaken town, and the muleskinner knows that something is wrong. Two miles south stands Bartholomew Packer's mine, the Godsend, a twenty-stamp mill that should be filling this box canyon with the thudding racket of the rock-crushers pulverizing ore. The sound of the stamps in operation is the sound of money being made, and only two things will stop them—Christmas and tragedy.

He dismounts his albino steed, the horse's pinked nostrils flaring, dirty mane matted with ice. The single-rig saddle is snow-cruled as well, its leather and cloth components—the mochila and shabrack—frozen stiff. He rubs George the horse's neck, speaking in soft, low tones he knows will calm the animal, telling him he did a good day's work and that

a warm stable awaits with feed and fresh water.

The muleskinner opens his wallet, collects the pint of busthead he bought at a bodega in Silverton, and swallows the remaining mouthful, whiskey crashing into his empty stomach like iced fire.

He wades through waist-deep snow to the mercantile, bangs his shop-mades on the doorframe. Inside, the lamps have been extinguished and the big stove squats dormant in the corner, unattended by the usual constellation of miners jawboning over coffee and tobacco. He calls for the owner as he crosses the board floor, moving between shelves, past stacked crates and burlap sacks bulging with sugar and flour.

“Jessup? It’s Brady! You in back?”

The twelve burros crane their scrawny necks in his direction when Brady emerges from the merc. He reaches into his greatcoat, pulls out a tin of Star Navy tobacco, and shoves a chew between lips and gums gone blackish purple in the last year.

“What the hell?” he whispers.

When he delivered supplies two weeks ago, this little mining town was bustling. Now Abandon looms listless before him in the gloom of late afternoon, streets empty, snow banked high against the unshoveled plank sidewalks, no tracks as far as he can see.

The cabins scattered across the lower slopes lie buried to their chimneys, and with not a one of them smoking, the air smells too clean.

Brady is a man at home in solitude, often days on the trail, alone in wild, quiet places, but this silence is all wrong—a lie. He feels menaced by it, and with each passing moment, more certain that something has happened here.

A wall of dark clouds scrapes over the peaks and snowflakes begin to speck the sleeves of his slicker. Here comes the wind. Chimes clang together over the doorway of the merc. It will be night soon.

He makes his way up the street into the saloon, still half-expecting Joss Maddox, the beautiful barkeep, to assault him with some gloriously profane greeting. No one's there. Not the mute piano player, not a single customer, and again, no light from the kerosene lamps, no warmth from the potbellied stove, just a half-filled glass on the pine bar, the beer frozen through.

The path to the nearest cabin lies beneath untrodden snow, and without webs, it takes five minutes to cover a hundred yards.

He pounds his gloved fist against the door, counts to sixty. The latch string hasn't been pulled in, and despite the circumstance, he still feels like a



trespasser as he steps inside uninvited.

In the dark, his eyes strain to adjust.

Around the base of a potted spruce tree, crumpled pages of newspaper clutters the dirt floor—remnants of Christmas.

Food sits untouched on a rustic table, far too lavish to be any ordinary meal for the occupants of this cramped, one-room cabin. This was Christmas dinner.

He removes a glove, touches the ham—cold and hard as ore. A pot of beans have frozen in their broth. The cake feels more like pumice than sponge, and two jagged glass stems still stand upright, the wine having frozen and shattered the crystal cups.

Outside again, back with his pack train, he shouts, turning slowly in the middle of the street so the words carry in all directions.

“Anyone here?”

His voice and the fading echo of it sound so small rising against the vast, indifferent sweep of wilderness. The sky dims. Snow falls harder. The church at the north end of town disappears in the storm.

It's twenty miles back to Silverton, and the pack train has been on the trail since before first light. They

need rest. Having skinned mules the last sixteen hours, he needs it, too, though the prospect of spending the night in Abandon, in this awful silence, unnerves him.

As he slips a boot into the stirrup, ready to drive the burros down to the stables, he notices something beyond the cribs at the south end of town. He puts George forward, trots through deep powder between the false-fronted buildings, and when he sees what caught his eye, whispers, "You old fool."

Just a snowman scowling at him, spindly arms made of spruce branches. Pinecones for teeth and eyes. Garland for a crown.

He tugs the reins, turning George back toward town, and the jolt of seeing her provokes, "Lord God Amighty."

He drops his head, tries to allay the thumping of his heart in the thin air. When he looks up again, the young girl is still there, perhaps six or seven, apparition-pale and just ten feet away, with locomotive-black curls and coal eyes to match—so dark and with such scant delineation between iris and pupil, they more resemble wet stones.

"You put a fright in me," he says. "What are you doin out here all alone?"

She backpedals.

“Don’t be scart. I ain’t the bogeyman.” Brady alights, wades toward her through the snow. With the young girl in webs sunk only a foot in powder, and the muleskinner to his waist, he thinks it odd to stand eye to eye with a child.

“You all right?” he asks. “I didn’t think there was nobody here.”

The snowflakes stand out like white confetti in the child’s hair.

“They’re all gone,” she says, no emotion, no tears, just an unaffected statement of fact.

“Even your Ma and Pa?”

She nods.

“Where’d they all go to? Can you show me?”

She takes another step back, reaches into her gray woolen cloak. The single-action Army is a heavy sidearm, and it sags comically in the child’s hand so she holds it like a rifle, Brady too surprised to do a thing but watch as she struggles with the hammer.

“Okay, I’ll show you,” she says, the hammer locked back, sighting him up, her small finger already in the trigger guard.

“Now hold on, wait just a—”

“Stay still.”

“That ain’t no toy to point in someone’s direction. It’s for—”

“Killin. I know. You’ll feel better directly.”

As Brady scrambles for a way to rib up this young girl to hand him the gun, he hears the report ricocheting through the canyon, finds himself lying on his back, surrounded by a wall of snow.

In the oval of gray winter sky, the child’s face appears, looking down at him.

What in God’s—

“It made a hole in your neck.”

He attempts to tell her to stable George and the burros, see that they’re fed and watered. After all the work they put in today, they deserve at least that. Only gurgles emerge, and when he tries to breathe, his throat whistles.

She points the Army at his face again, one eye closed, the barrel slightly quivering, a parody of aiming.

He stares up into the deluge of snowflakes, the sky already immersed in bluish dusk that seems to deepen before his eyes, and he wonders, *Is the day really fading that fast, or am I?*

\* \* \* \* \*

SNOWBOUND

*Published June 2010 by Minotaur Books*

DESCRIPTION: For Will Innis and his daughter, Devlin, the loss was catastrophic. Every day for the past five years, they wonder where she is, if she is—Will's wife, Devlin's mother—because Rachael Innis vanished one night during an electrical storm on a lonely desert highway, and suspected of her death, Will took his daughter and fled.

Now, Will and Devlin live under different names in another town, having carved out a new life for themselves as they struggle to maintain some semblance of a family.

When one night, a beautiful, hard-edged FBI agent appears on their doorstep, they fear the worst, but she hasn't come to arrest Will. "I know you're innocent," she tells him, "because Rachael wasn't the first...or the last." Desperate for answers, Will and Devlin embark on a terrifying journey that spans four thousand miles from the desert southwest to the wilds of Alaska , heading unaware into the heart of a nightmare, because the truth is infinitely worse than they ever imagined.

*Excerpt from Snowbound...*

In the evening of the last good day either of them would know for years to come, the girl pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped through onto the back porch.

“Daddy?”

Will Innis set the legal pad aside and made room for Devlin to climb into his lap. His daughter was small for eleven, felt like the shell of a child in his arms.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked and in her scratchy voice he could hear the remnants of her last respiratory infection like gravel in her lungs.

“Working up a closing for my trial in the morning.”

“Is your client the bad guy again?”

Will smiled. “You and your mother. I’m not really supposed to think of it that way, sweetheart.”

“What’d he do?” His little girl’s face had turned ruddy in the sunset and the fading light brought out threads of platinum in her otherwise midnight hair.

“He allegedly—”

“What’s that mean?”

“Allegedly?”

“Yeah.”

“Means it’s not been proven. He’s suspected of selling drugs.”

“Like what I take?”

“No, your drugs are good. They help you. He was

selling, allegedly selling, bad drugs to people.”

“Why are they bad?”

“Because they make you lose control.”

“Why do people take them?”

“They like how it makes them feel.”

“How does it make them feel?”

He kissed her forehead and looked at his watch.

“It’s after eight, Devi. Let’s go bang on those lungs.”

She sighed but she didn’t argue. She never tried to get out of it.

He stood up cradling his daughter and walked over to the redwood railing.

They stared into the wilderness that bordered Oasis Hills, their subdivision. The houses on No-Water Lane had the Sonoran Desert for a backyard.

“Look,” he said. “See them?” A half mile away, specks filed out of an arroyo and trotted across the desert toward a shadeless forest of giant saguaro cacti that looked vaguely sinister profiled against the horizon.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Coyotes. What do you bet they start yapping when the sun goes down?”

After supper, he read to Devlin from *A Wrinkle in Time*. They’d been working their way through the

penultimate chapter, "Aunt Beast," but Devlin was exhausted and drifted off before Will had finished the second page.

He closed the book and set it on the carpet and turned out the light. Cool desert air flowed in through an open window. A sprinkler whispered in the next door neighbor's yard. Devlin yawned, made a cooing sound that reminded him of rocking her to sleep as a newborn. Her eyes fluttered and she said very softly, "Mom?"

"She's working late at the clinic, sweetheart."

"When's she coming back?"

"Few hours."

"Tell her to come in and kiss me?"

"I will."

He was nowhere near ready for court in the morning but he stayed, running his fingers through Devlin's hair until she'd fallen back to sleep. Finally, he slid carefully off the bed and walked out onto the deck to gather up his books and legal pads. He had a late night ahead of him. A pot of strong coffee would help.

Next door, the sprinklers had gone quiet.

A lone cricket chirped in the desert.

Thunderless lightning sparked somewhere over Mexico, and the coyotes began to scream.



The thunderstorm caught up with Rachael Innis thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It was 9:30 p.m., and it had been a long day at the free clinic in Sonoyta, where she volunteered her time and services once a week as a bilingual psychologist. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth. High beams lit the steam rising off the pavement, and in the rearview mirror, Rachael saw the pair of headlights a quarter of a mile back that had been with her for the last ten minutes.

Glowing beads suddenly appeared on the shoulder just ahead. She jammed her foot into the brake pedal, the Grand Cherokee fishtailing into the oncoming lane before skidding to a stop. A doe and her fawn ventured into the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights. Rachael let her forehead fall onto the steering wheel, closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

The deer moved on. She accelerated the Cherokee, another dark mile passing as pellets of hail hammered the hood.

The Cherokee veered sharply toward the shoulder and she nearly lost control again, trying to correct her bearing, but the steering wheel wouldn't straighten out. Rachael lifted her foot off the gas pedal and

eased over onto the side of the road.

When she killed the ignition all she could hear was the rain and hail drumming on the roof. The car that had been following her shot by. She set her glasses in the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped down into a puddle that engulfed her pumps. The downpour soaked through her black suit. She shivered. It was pitch-black between lightning strikes and she moved forward carefully, feeling her way along the warm metal of the hood.

A slash of lightning hit the desert just a few hundred yards out. It set her body tingling, her ears ringing. I'm going to be electrocuted. There came a train of earsplitting strikes, flashbulbs of electricity that lit the sky just long enough for her to see that the tires on the driver side were still intact.

Her hands trembled now. A tall saguaro stood burning like a cross in the desert. She groped her way over to the passenger side as marble-size hail collected in her hair. The desert was electrified again, spreading wide and empty all around her.

In the eerie blue light she saw that the front tire on the passenger side was flat.

Back inside the Cherokee, Rachael sat behind the steering wheel, mascara trailing down her cheeks like sable tears. She wrung out her long black hair and

massaged the headache building between her temples. Her purse lay in the passenger floorboard. She dragged it into her lap and shoved her hand inside, rummaging for the cell phone. She found it, tried her husband's number, but there was no service in the storm.

Rachael looked into the back of the Cherokee at the spare. She had no way of contacting AAA and passing cars would be few and far between on this remote highway at this hour of the night. I'll just wait and try Will again when the storm has passed.

Squeezing the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield into the stormy darkness, somewhere north of the border in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Middle of nowhere.

There was a brilliant streak of lightning. In the split second illumination she saw a black Escalade parked a hundred yards up the shoulder.

Thunder rattled the windows. Five seconds elapsed. When the sky exploded again, Rachael felt a strange, unnerving pull to look through the driver side window.

A man swung a crowbar through the glass.

### 3

Will startled back into consciousness, disoriented

and thirsty. It was so quiet—just the discreet drone of a computer fan and the second hand of the clock ticking in the adjacent bedroom. He found himself slouched in the leather chair at the desk in his small home office, the CPU still purring, the monitor switched into sleep mode.

As he yawned, everything rushed back in a torrent of anxiety. He'd been hammering out notes for his closing argument and hit a wall at ten o'clock. The evidence was damning. He was going to lose. He'd only closed his eyes for a moment to clear his head.

He reached for the mug of coffee and took a sip. Winced. It was cold and bitter. He jostled the mouse. When the screen restored, he looked at the clock and realized he wouldn't be sleeping anymore tonight. It was 4:09 a.m. He was due in court in less than five hours.

First things first—he needed an immediate and potent infusion of caffeine.

His office adjoined the master bedroom at the west end of the house, and passing through on his way to the kitchen, he noticed a peculiar thing. He'd expected to see his wife buried under the myriad quilts and blankets on their bed, but she wasn't there. The comforter was smooth and taut, undisturbed since they'd made it up yesterday morning.

He walked through the living room into the den and down the hallway toward the east end of the house. Rachael had probably come home, seen him asleep at his desk, and gone in to kiss Devlin. She'd have been exhausted from working all day at the clinic. She'd probably fallen asleep in there. He could picture the nightlight glow on their faces as he reached his daughter's door.

It was cracked, exactly as he'd left it seven hours ago when he'd put Devlin to bed.

He eased the door open. Rachael wasn't with her.

Will wide awake now, closing Devlin's door, heading back into the den.

"Rachael? You here, hon?"

He went to the front door, turned the deadbolt, stepped outside.

Dark houses. Porchlights. Streets still wet from the thunderstorms that blew through several hours ago. No wind, the sky clearing, bright with stars.

When he saw them in the driveway, his knees gave out and he sat down on the steps and tried to remember how to breathe. One Beamer, no Jeep Cherokee, and a pair of patrol cars, two uniformed officers coming toward him, their hats shelved under their arms.

The patrolmen sat in the living room on the couch, Will facing them in a chair. The smell of new paint was still strong. He and Rachael had redone the walls and the vaulted ceiling in terracotta last weekend. Most of the black and white desert photographs that adorned the room still leaned against the antique chest of drawers, waiting to be re-hung.

The lawmen were businesslike in their delivery, taking turns with the details, as if they'd rehearsed who would say what, their voices so terribly measured and calm.

There wasn't much information yet. Rachael's Cherokee had been found on the shoulder of Arizona 85 in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Right front tire flat, punctured with a nail to cause a slow and steady loss of air pressure. Driver side window busted out.

No Rachael. No blood.

They asked Will a few questions. They tried to sympathize. They said how sorry they were, Will just shaking his head and staring at the floor, a tightness in his chest, constricting his windpipe in a slow strangulation.

He happened to look up at some point, saw Devlin standing in the hall in a plain pink tee-shirt that fell all the way to the carpet, the tattered blanket she'd slept

with every night since her birth draped over her left arm. And he could see in her eyes that she'd heard every word the patrolmen had said about her mother, because they were filling up with tears.

#### 4

Rachael Innis was strapped upright with two-inch webbing to the leather seat behind the driver. She stared at the console lights. The digital clock read 4:32 a.m. She remembered the crowbar through the window and nothing after.

Bach's Four Lute Suites blared from the Bose stereo system, John Williams playing the classical guitar. Beyond the windshield, the headlights cut a feeble swath of light through the darkness, and even though she was riding in a luxury SUV, the shocks did little to ease the violent jarring from whatever primitive road they traveled.

Her wrists and ankles were comfortably but securely bound with nylon restraints. Her mouth wasn't gagged. From her vantage point, she could only see the back of the driver's head and occasionally the side of his face by the cherry glow of his cigarette. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was dark, and he smelled of a subtle, spicy cologne.

It occurred to her that he didn't know she was

awake, but the thought wasn't two seconds old when she caught his eyes in the rearview mirror. They registered her consciousness, turned back to the road.

They drove on. An endless stream of rodents darted across the road ahead and a thought kept needling her—at some point, he was going to stop the car and do whatever he was driving her out in the desert to do.

“Have you urinated on my seat?” She thought she detected the faintest accent.

“No.”

“You tell me if you have to urinate. I'll stop the car.”

“Okay. Where are you—”

“No talking. Unless you have to urinate.”

“I just—”

“You want your mouth taped? You have a cold. That would make breathing difficult.”

Devlin was the only thing she'd ever prayed for and that was years ago, but as she watched the passing sagebrush and cactus through the deeply tinted windows, she pleaded with God again.

Now the Escalade was slowing. It came to a stop. He turned off the engine and stepped outside and shut the door. Her door opened. He stood watching her. He was very handsome, with flawless, brown skin



(save for an indentation in the bridge of his nose), liquid blue eyes, and black hair greased back from his face. His pretty teeth seemed to gleam in the night. Rachael's chest heaved against the strap of webbing.

He said, "Calm down, Rachael." Her name sounded like a foreign word on his lips. He took out a syringe from his black leather jacket and uncapped the needle.

"What is that?" she asked.

"You have nice veins." He ducked into the Escalade and turned her arm over. When the needle entered, she gasped.

"Please listen. If this is some kind of ransom thing —"

"No, no. You've already been purchased. In fact, right now, there isn't a safer place in the world for you to be than in my possession."

A gang of coyotes erupted in demonic howls somewhere out in that empty dark and Rachael thought they sounded like a woman burning alive, and she began to scream until the drug took her.

\* \* \* \* \*

**BLAKE CROUCH** is the author of **DESERT**

PLACES, LOCKED DOORS, and ABANDON, which was an IndieBound Notable Selection last summer, all published by St. Martin's Press. His newest thriller, SNOWBOUND, also from St. Martin's, was released in 2010. His short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Thriller 2*, and other anthologies, including the new SHIVERS VI anthology from Cemetery Dance. In 2009, he co-wrote "Serial" with J.A. Konrath, which has been downloaded over 350,000 times and topped the Kindle bestseller list for 4 weeks. That story and ABANDON have also been optioned for film. Blake lives in Durango, Colorado. His website is [www.blakecrouch.com](http://www.blakecrouch.com).

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