Part One: The Butcher Bird

The radio gave out somewhere around the last gas station, I never reached over to turn it off. Static now fills the car, a low and endless tide that rises and falls with the curves of the road, I have come to find a strange comfort in it. It is the only voice I have heard in three hours that won't tell me how I am holding up. The road winds upward into the foothills, the pines pressing in dark and patient on either side, and for a long while I see no other cars at all.

The name's Clyde Bronsen. Forty-one. I carried mail for fourteen years, and technically I still do on paper, they've had me on medical leave going on eleven weeks now, feels like an eternity. Tsk, Leave. Like I stepped out for cigarettes or lunch.

I'm not getting into what happened at work. I can't, I won't. It's written down somewhere, there's a folder with my name on it, whoever needs to know already knows. Something gave out in me and it took a lot with it when it went.

They gave me pills for it, those doctors in white coats. Little white pills- same color. The orange bottle's in the glove box, I can hear it rattle every time the car dips and bounds through one of the many potholes dotting the road. I've taken them every single day, per the doctor's orders. I'd like that to count for something.

I'm not a hiker. Did a couple easy trails before Owen was born, the kind with a neat little gift shop at the bottom. The boots on my feet I bought Tuesday, the new pleather smell still clinging in the air, still just a little tight around the heel. The pack is a loaner from a guy at the depot, he handed it over without asking what for, he just looked at me in an understanding manner. I had to go sit in my car a while after that.

Ruth, the therapist, she's the one who said for me to get outside. "Do something with your body, give your head the day off." I told her sure. Then I went home and sat in the living room with the lights off till two in the morning, same as every night, and somewhere around then I figured she probably had a point.

I found the trail on some old forum. 'Harrow Notch', two-day loop through a state forest nobody seems to go to. Quiet, the guy who posted it said. Good. I didn't want families. I didn't want to watch some dad lift his kid up on his shoulders at an overlook, not now.

Owen's nine, turned in August.

I went to the party. Dana's sister's backyard, paper plates, a sheet cake with his name spelled out in blue gel. I sat down at the far end of the picnic table. When he got to my present he tore the paper off and looked at it a second, and not a moment more. A Remote control pickup. Not the monster truck with the big tires, the one he'd circled in the flyer, I found that out after. He said thank you, Dad. Real polite, just like his mother. Then he put it under his chair and went on to the next one.

I ate two pieces of cake I didn't want so I'd have something to do with my hands.

He used to wait for me at the front window. Five-fifteen every night you'd see his face mashed up on the glass, breath fogging it, by the time I got my key in the door he'd be in the hall with his arms up. I don't know when that stopped. I keep trying to find the last one, the last night he was at the window, I can't. I'd quit looking up at it by then. I'd come in, go straight to the couch, put the TV on low. He probably stood there a few more weeks waiting on me. I was right in the next room, the things you realize too late.

There's a fishing rod in the garage still in the plastic. Bought it in March. Told him we'd go up to the lake once it warmed up. Then it warmed up, they offered overtime. June turned into July. July turned into August. One night I'm getting a beer out of the fridge and I hear Dana in the other room telling him “Don't count on it, bud”, and he replied “I know.”. That crushed me.

I met Dana at a diner when I was twenty-six. She was working the counter. I said something dumb, I don't remember what, she laughed so hard coffee came out her nose. Spent the rest of her shift pretending to be mad at me about it.

We were good. For a long time we were good, I'm not going to make out like we weren't. Little apartment over a laundromat, everything smelled like dryer sheets. Owen came along. And the years went by, I didn't think about any of it. You don't. You're just in it.

Then I wasn't. Couldn't tell you when it all came to a head. I'd come home, eat, then sleep. Same route every day, same doors, same dogs. Somewhere in there I quit talking at dinner. She'd tell me something funny that happened at work and I'd nod. After a while she stopped telling me.

A couple years ago she came and sat down next to me on the couch. Lights off, TV on mute. She said, Clyde, I'm lonely. You're sitting right here and I'm lonely.

I had stuff to say. I could feel it right there. But nothing came out, that’s how it always went. She sat there maybe a full minute, waiting. Then she got up and went to bed.

She was mostly gone already when the thing at work happened. That just finished it.

The night they brought me home I said something to Owen. I don't remember it. Dana does, she's never told me, I've never asked. Next morning I came down and he was at the table eating Cheerios. He saw me, got down off his chair, went and stood behind his mom. Hand balled up in the back of her jeans. Didn't cry or anything. Just watched me from back there.

I see that a lot. Mostly when I'm trying to sleep.

The trailhead's a gravel lot cut out of the woods, room for maybe a dozen cars if people park right. There's only one other vehicle, a long white passenger van with dust caked halfway up the doors and some outfitter's decal peeling off the side. A wooden kiosk at the mouth of the trail with a map behind plexiglass so scratched up you have to lean in to read it. Past that the trees just start.

I sit in the car a while with the engine off. Take my pill dry. I think about bringing the bottle, I don't, two nights, what's the worst that happens, I'd rather not lose them in a creek somewhere. It goes back into the glove box under the registration.

When I get out it's quiet. I don't mean nice quiet. It’s an awkward, dead, still, quiet. There just isn't anything, not a soul making noise, not a breeze, nothing.

There's a clump of barberry at the far end of the lot, thorny stuff, and there's a bird sitting on top of it. Gray, white underneath, about the size of a robin, black stripe through the eyes. It's got its head cocked at me. A couple inches under it there's a grasshopper stuck on one of the thorns, still kicking one leg.

I know what it is before I even think about it.

My father drove a milk truck for thirty-one years. He didn't talk much. When I was eight or so he walked me out back to the fence line one evening, three strands of barbed wire between our yard and Hutchins' cow field, and pointed at a gray bird on one of the posts. “Butcher bird,” he said “Shrike.” I asked why they called it that and he didn't answer, he just walked me down along the wire a ways. There was a field mouse stuck on one of the barbs, dried out. Further down a grasshopper, then a baby sparrow hanging by its middle with its head down.

He said it didn't have the feet to hold its food so it hung it up and came back later, whenever it felt like it. Then he stood there a minute and said, ”Patient little bastard”. Only time I ever heard him swear. He died nine years ago in the cab of that truck, parked outside a grocery store. They told us he didn't feel much. I don't know who decides that.

The bird watches me get my pack out of the back seat. I walk over to the kiosk and it turns its head after me, slow.

I read the map twice. Harrow Notch is a dotted line up the middle through a gap between two summits, loops around the back side and comes down to this same lot. I read it a third time, I don't know why. Then I go in.

When I look back the bird's still sitting there. The grasshopper's quit moving.

The first couple hours are fine. The trail's an old one, worn down into a trench between the roots, climbs real slow through oak and maple. Sun coming down through the leaves. A wet dirt smell. I sweat through my shirt in the first mile. By the second I've got a hot spot going on my left heel, I know it'll be a blister by dark.

I stop for lunch on a flat rock next to a stream. Peanut butter crackers, a granola bar, water that tastes like the bottle, plastic and bitter. I'm sitting there chewing and the window comes back into my mind. Owen's face on the glass. Then the picnic table, the truck going under his chair. Then the kitchen. I try thinking about the trail, about my heel, what I'll eat for dinner. Ruth never told me how you're supposed to not think about something. You just end up thinking about it harder.

At some point I notice the cracker wrapper in my hand is wet. I sit on that rock a long time. There's nobody around for miles, which I guess was the point.

When I'm done I wash my face in the stream and keep going.

Somewhere in the afternoon the birds stop. There was a thrush going all morning somewhere up ahead, crows off to the left, chipmunks squeaking around in the leaves. Now there's nothing. I stand in the middle of the trail holding my breath to listen and all I've got is wind way up in the tops of the trees, my pack straps creaking, my own heart.

A hawk went over, I figure. That happens out here.

I've gone maybe ten steps when a stick breaks somewhere behind me to the right. A small one. I turn around and look down the trail. Nothing. Wait a good minute. Nothing. I turn back and walk, and maybe twenty steps on, another one goes, a little closer.

I don't stop that time. I walk faster and tell myself how it's a deer, deer get curious, I've heard that. It doesn't happen again. The rest of the day though I've got that feeling on the back of my neck like when you're walking to your car in a parking garage at night.

Later on the wind turns and I get a whiff of something rotten, sweet and heavy, meat gone over. Then it's gone. Something dead off in the brush. I don't go looking, I know better than to leave the trail, especially out here.

Not long after that I almost walk right past a groundhog. It's stuck on the broken top of a sapling next to the trail about chest high, pierced through the middle. Dried out, flat, gone gray, the fur stiff. Its front paws are tucked up under its chin. It's been there a while.

Hawk, I tell myself again. Hawks drop things. Or some kid with a BB gun, some sick joke.

The thing is it's facing the trail. Whatever left it there turned it around so it'd be looking at you when you came up the hill. I keep chewing on that for the next hour. I can't see a hawk doing that in my head.

It's getting on toward dark when I smell woodsmoke. Then voices, somebody laughing, a pot banging. I didn't know how bad I wanted to hear another person till my legs almost go out from under me.

They've set up in a flat spot at the bottom of the climb, big hemlocks all around, eight of them sitting around a fire. When I come out of the trees everybody stops talking and looks at me.

I give them names of my own in my head, same as I used to do with the dogs on my route, and that's how I still think of them.

The big sunburnt one is up first with his hand out. "Well look at this. Another one doing the Notch." He shakes my hand like he's pumping a well. "By yourself? Brave man. Crazy, but brave." He's got a laminated trail map folded in his shirt pocket and he keeps tapping it while he talks. Before I get my pack off I've heard he led this bunch up from the lot this morning, he's done the Notch a dozen times, could do it with his eyes closed, and one time he walked out of the Adirondacks on a broken ankle. That's the Guide.

He sits me down on a log next to a young couple in matching fleece jackets. They scoot over without me asking. Their rings are so new they still catch the fire. She smiles at me, he holds out a bag of trail mix, neither of them says much. Turns out it's their honeymoon. I still can't decide what I think about that.

I set my tin cup on the log to get my pack straps undone and when I reach for it it isn't there.

Two guys across the fire, mid-twenties, same face on both of them. "You lose something?" one says.

"Rough country," says the other one.

It turns up ten minutes later zipped into a side pocket of my own pack that I never use. The second one finds it, real surprised, and the first one gives him a slow clap. They've been doing bits like that all day, I can tell from how the rest of them don't even look up. When the Guide asks what I do and I say I carry mail, the first twin points at me and says "Postman," and the other one salutes in faux solidarity. They never call me anything else.

There's an old man sitting off by himself with a big pair of binoculars around his neck on a leather strap gone soft with age and usage. Once I've got my cup back he reaches over and fills it out of a dented percolator. Nods at me. Goes back to looking at the fire. He's the Professor before he ever opens his mouth, I'm not sure why. Something about how he looks at things, like he's going to be asked about them later.

The woman across from me has her hair yanked back so tight it pulls at her eyebrows. She wants to know if I saw any bears on the way up. If I've checked for ticks. She asks the Guide if the forecast's changed since lunch, and from his face I don't think it's the first time. When she hears I didn't bring a satellite phone either she looks at me like I let her down personally. Later on, once it's dark and the fire's down, she passes her phone around. A little girl with a gap in her teeth, two braids done crooked.

"Ava," she says. "She's nine."

I hold onto it a while before I pass it on. Same age as Owen.

There's one more guy, skinny, red flannel shirt, on the far side of the fire with a lip full of something. He doesn't get up. He doesn't say hello. Every time I look over he's already looking at me, chewing. I don't know what I did to him to earn his suspicion. I figure I'll find out eventually.

It's the Guide who says I should come with them over the Notch in the morning. Up through the pass, down the back side, back at the lot by tomorrow night. "Safety in numbers," he says, and slaps my shoulder. "Besides, man shouldn't be out here all alone with just his own head to talk to. That's how people go nuts."

He laughs. He doesn't know anything about me.

I think about the stick breaking behind me. The groundhog. My tent by itself out there in the dark.

"Sure," I say curtly. "Thanks."

Later, after the twins run out of material, I end up next to the old man and tell him about the bird at the lot. I don't know why. He puts his cup down.

"Loggerhead shrike," he says. "Lanius ludovicianus. You don't see them up here much anymore, they've been dropping off for years."

I tell him my dad showed me one once on a fence.

"Your father knew his birds." He tells me what I already know, the thorns, the wire, coming back for it. Says some people think the males do it to show off for a mate, the more they've got hung up the better they look. "I've never bought that," he says. "I think it's just patience. A shrike's never in a hurry. It knows where everything is. It knows it'll all be right there when it gets back."

One of the twins, half asleep, says "Metal."

"So metal," says the other one, eyes shut.

The flannel guy makes a noise through his nose. The woman with the tight hair pulls her jacket around herself. The old man goes back to looking at the fire.

I sleep that night. Actual sleep. Maybe it's being that tired, or the Guide snoring a couple tents over, the newlyweds whispering. I lie there looking up at the inside of my tent and for once nothing plays back on me.

Sometime late there's a sound way off in the woods, high and thin, going up and down. Like a fawn bleating. It goes on a while and stops. I'm asleep before I can think about it.

Best night I've had since August.

Part Two: Wrong Turns

The Guide's got us up before the sun clears the ridge, clapping and yelling "Let's go, people, mountain's not gonna climb itself." The twins groan at the same time. The woman with the tight hair asks if anybody else heard crying last night. The Guide says probably a fox, they make all kinds of noises, sound like a woman screaming sometimes. She seems to take that. I do too.

First few hours it's just hard. Switchbacks up through the hemlocks, then a long slope of birch and big boulders with moss on them. It gets colder the higher we go. The Guide's out front talking, the tight-hair woman right on his heels asking him things. Flannel walks by himself in the middle with his thumbs hooked in his straps. The newlyweds hold hands even on the steep parts, which can't be easy. The twins are at the back arguing about something that happened at a Denny's in Springfield, whether a waitress named Tammy threw a plate at them or near them.

I end up walking with the old man. He's slow but he doesn't get winded like I do. He points stuff out as we go. “Pileated woodpecker, hear it knocking? Big as a crow.” “Paper birch, the bark peels off in sheets, the Abenaki used to make canoes out of it.” “Little ferns on the rocks, rock cap fern, you can chew the root and it tastes like licorice.” He breaks a piece off and hands it to me. It really does.

He talks to me the way you'd talk to a kid on a fishing trip, I guess. Somewhere in there I'm in the parking lot behind the elementary school, Sunday morning, running behind Owen's bike holding the back of the seat. “Don't let go, Daddy, don't let go.” “I won't, I got you.” Then I let go. He went thirty feet before he

figured it out and looked back over his shoulder at me and went down on the blacktop, both knees. I carried him home on my shoulders and he cried into my hair, “You said you wouldn't let go.” By the time we got in the door he was telling Dana how far he went.

"You all right?"

I'm stopped on the trail with my hand on a birch tree. I don't know how long.

"Catching my breath," I say.

He looks at me a second longer than he needs to. "Take your time," he says. "Mountain'll wait."

A little before noon the trail splits around a big boulder, cracked down the middle, one path going left and one going right. No sign. The Guide gets out his map and looks at it a long time. Then he folds it up and points left.

"Other one's an old logging cut. Goes nowhere."

Nobody says anything. He's done it a dozen times.

The left one gets narrow after a while, rocky, branches grabbing at your sleeves. The paint blazes on the trees start getting faded, then patchy, then there's long stretches without any at all. I'm about to say something when we come around a bend and there's one on an oak right in front of us, bright yellow, shiny.

I touch it going by. I don't know why.

It's wet. It comes off on my finger, tacky. I smell it without thinking and it's sweet, a little off, like fruit that sat in the bowl too long. I wipe it on my pants. I look around for whoever painted it. There's nobody. There's no more fresh ones after that either, just the one.

Who am I going to tell. “Hey everybody, the paint's wet.” They’d think I was a nut.

An hour later there's another split boulder, another left and right. The Guide gets the map out again and this time he's at it a lot longer.

"Huh," he says. "That's funny."

"What's funny?" says the tight-hair woman.

"Nothing. We go right."

By the middle of the afternoon we're up on a ridge that isn't on his map. I know it isn't because at the water stop I watch him run his finger over it, back and forth, his lips going. I know the face he's making. I've made it. You keep looking because you're sure the next time you look it'll be back the way it's supposed to be.

I don't say that. Last thing these people need is me explaining that. We don’t need any fights this far out.

"Map's old," he says, loud. "They rerouted some stuff since this was printed. We'll cut down off the ridge and pick up the main trail on the far side. Happens all the time."

"Does it?" says Flannel. First thing I've heard out of him all day.

"Yeah. It does, routine stuff, happened to me once before."

Flannel shrugs. Before he looks away he looks at me.

Twenty minutes down off the ridge there's a coyote hanging from a dead hemlock about level with my face. I think at first it's caught in a snare. Then I see the broken branch coming up through the bottom of its jaw. All its weight's hanging off that one spike. Back legs crossed at the ankles. Eyes open. No tongue.

"Trappers," the Guide says before anybody asks. He doesn't slow down. "Old-timers still run lines up here. Hang one up to scare off the rest."

The twins quit arguing about Tammy. The old man stops in front of it for a while, studying it, then looks at me, then walks on.

I don't know anything about trapping but I don't think they cross the legs.

We stop to rest at the edge of a clearing, everybody spread out on flat rocks with their boots off. My heel's a mess, the sock's stuck to it. The twins are going back and forth about whether you pop a blister or leave it alone. The old man's got his binoculars up looking at the far tree line, but he hasn't named a bird in a while. The sun's warm. It's almost nice.

Then the tight-hair woman sits straight up and turns around and stares at the bride.

"What did you say?"

The bride's got a raisin halfway to her mouth. "I didn't say anything."

"You said we're lost. You said we're lost, aren't we, he's gotten us all lost. You were right behind me."

The bride's been sitting ten feet in front of her the whole time eating raisins one at a time. We all saw it. The woman looks around at everybody, then at the twins, and the twins both put their hands up.

"Wasn't us."

"Too subtle for us."

People laugh a little. The Guide says sound bounces funny off rocks up here. The woman nods, hardly hiding her suspicion, or is it weariness? We put our boots on.

What I don't say is that when she said it, the we're lost part, it came out in the bride's voice. Not her doing an impression. The bride's actual voice, out of her mouth. The bride heard it too. I watched her flinch.

After that the bride walks so close to her husband their shoulders keep bumping.

We're supposed to be at the lot by dark. We're not. The Guide calls it and says we'll camp and get out first thing. He says first thing a lot that night.

We set up in a flat spot with big hemlocks all around. Same as last night. Same mossy boulder at the north end, the one that looks like a dog lying down. I walk around in the last light looking at the ground for the burnt ring from our fire, the matted spots from the tents. I don't find them. I'm pretty sure I don't.

Nobody talks much at dinner. The old man sits off from everybody with his binoculars in his lap looking out past the light. I go to bed early.

I can't sleep. Wind in the hemlocks, my heel throbbing, the window, the kitchen, don't let go Daddy, all of it going around.

Sometime after midnight somebody's walking around the outside of the camp. Slow. Crunch, stop, crunch, stop, like they're checking each tent.

They stop at mine.

"Clive," says the Guide, right outside the nylon. "Clive. You up? Come out here a sec."

The Guide's been calling me Clyde all day. Clyde buddy, Clyde my man, hey Clyde.

I don't answer. I don't move.

It doesn't leave. After a while I can hear it breathing. Wet and slow, in and out, like there's too much in its mouth. The smell comes in through the mesh, the same rotten sweet smell from the trail, so thick I can taste it in the back of my throat.

Then something pushes on the side of the tent.

There's just enough light to see the shape of it in the nylon. Long and thin, a finger maybe, except it's as long as my forearm and it's got too many knuckles. It drags along the side of the tent from down by my feet up toward my head. I can hear it on the fabric.

It stops by my face. Six inches.

I count my heartbeats. I lose count and start over. I don't know when it goes. I don't hear it leave.

In the morning the Guide swears he slept like a rock and never got up once. I believe him.

When nobody's looking I check the side of my tent. There's a smear up near the top, gray, slick, drying already, like what a slug leaves on a sidewalk. I wipe it off with the dew-wet leaves.

The tight-hair woman finds the deer the third morning. She screams and we all come running and she's pointing up.

Whitetail doe, forty feet up in the crotch of a dead oak. A broken limb's gone through her belly and out her back and she's hanging there on it, legs down, head tipped back so she's looking right at us. The blood's dried black down the bark.

Something's taken the skin off her side. One long strip, shoulder to hip, peeled back careful and left hanging. It moves a little in the wind. Underneath's wet and pink.

There's no flies on her. It's a warm morning and there's a dead deer out in the open and there isn't one fly.

"Bear," the Guide says. "Black bears cache a kill. Drag it up somewhere the coyotes can't get it."

"Bears don't climb forty feet with a deer," Flannel says. "Not with a branch through it."

"Mountain lion."

"Ain't been a mountain lion out here in a hundred years."

"Well something put it up there."

"Yeah," says Flannel. "Something did."

The old man hasn't said anything. When I look over he's already looking at me.

The Guide decides we keep going down. Every mountain has a bottom, he says. Find a stream, follow it to a road. Nobody's got a better idea.

We walk four hours. Down through hemlock so thick it's dark at noon. Across a stream that for a stretch I'd swear is running uphill, back toward the high ground, till I make myself stop looking at it. Up a little rise covered with pale round rocks.

The dead oak's at the top.

Same crotch, same branch, same doe looking down at us. The strip of skin off her side is longer now. It hangs nearly to the ground.

The tight-hair woman sits down in the dirt and cries. The groom holds his wife. One of the twins laughs, high, and the other one grabs his arm hard enough I see his knuckles go white. The Guide gets the map out with his hands shaking and I watch him go gray.

There's a trail on it that wasn't there this morning. I know because I was looking over his shoulder. A dotted line that goes around and around this rise, and next to it in the same neat print there's a name. Too many letters, consonants jammed together. My eyes water if I look at it too long.

He folds it up and puts it away and doesn't take it out again for a long time.

After that I lose track of the days. The sun comes up and goes down but not always where it should. The trail's there and then it isn't and then it is again. We ration food, then we ration that. The twins split one granola bar four ways and make a whole ceremony out of it to get people laughing. It almost works.

The moose is maybe the fourth day. I didn't know we had moose this far south. The old man says a few wander down from Canada. This one's up in a stand of dead spruce, three snapped-off trunks close together, and it's been brought down on all three at once, chest, belly, throat. It's ten feet off the ground. The antlers are hooked back over a branch so the head's up, like it's mounted.

It's got to be twelve hundred pounds. I try to picture what could lift that and put it up there. I can't.

The eyes are gone, the lids folded shut over nothing. There's something hung on the antlers, gray-pink, looped from one point to the next. It takes me a while. It's the guts. They've been pulled out and draped on its own antlers like Christmas garland.

Nobody screams. The groom walks off into the trees and we listen to him get sick for a long time. The Guide stares up at it with his mouth moving and nothing comes out.

We sleep in shifts after that. Every morning nobody can agree who stood watch or how long or what they heard. Everybody's hearing things now. Seeing things. The groom sees his mother in the birches waving at him in the blue dress they buried her in. The tight-hair woman hears her phone going, Ava's ringtone, some cartoon song, and her phone's been dead two days and there's never been signal. Flannel won't say what he sees but I catch him staring off into the trees for minutes at a time, chewing nothing. The twins quit doing bits.

I think about Owen. Out here there isn't anything else to think about.

The stars on his ceiling. I put them up the year he turned four, standing on a kitchen chair with a printout of the real constellations because I wanted the Big Dipper where it actually goes. Took me four hours. Dana kept coming to the doorway to laugh at me. That night I turned off the light and they came on green over his bed and he lay there with his mouth open.

“Daddy, you brought the sky inside.”

I don't know if they still glow. I don't know if he took them down.

Fourth night or fifth. I'm lying awake. I'm hungry past being hungry, it's more like a hum all through me.

"Father?"

Right outside the tent. Close enough I could put my hand on the nylon and touch him.

"Father, I've been waiting for you so patiently."

It's Owen. The little lisp on his S's, the catch he gets at the end. I'd know it through a wall.

"It's dreadfully cold out here, Father. The interminable dark is so very cold. My skin doesn't fit right anymore. It's too small, it pinches. Won't you come out and keep me company? Won't you help me take it off?"

Owen's never called me Father in his life. He can't say interminable. He'd say super long. He's three hundred miles from here asleep under those stars.

My hand's on the zipper anyway. I've got the pull between my fingers.

"Father, please," it says, right up against the fabric, and there's the smell. "You said you wouldn't let go."

I let go of the zipper. I put my hands over my ears and shut my eyes and I lie there until it gets light out and it finally quits.

In the morning I sit off by myself on a log.

Is it me? Is it coming back? My pills are in the glove box. I've missed five, six maybe. I don't know what happens when you miss six, Ruth never covered that. Maybe this is it. Maybe your head just builds its own woods and walks you into them.

Except the bride's voice came out of somebody else's mouth and everybody heard it. Except the deer. Except the slime on my tent and the map and nine people who don't know each other all getting our own personal ghosts. If it's crazy then it's catching, and I don't know if that's better.

That night the old man gets up to take a leak and walks out into the trees.

I'm on watch. He nods at me going by the fire, binoculars still around his neck at two in the morning. I nod back. He steps out of the light. I can hear him for a while, crunching, getting further off.

Then I can't.

I give him five minutes. Ten. Old guys take a while. He went far to be polite.

At twenty I get up and go to the edge of the light and say, not too loud, "Hey. You okay out there?"

Nothing comes back.

Standing there in the cold I realize I never asked him his name.

Part Three: The Larder

We look for him as soon as it's light. Everybody in a line twenty feet apart, the way they do on the news when a kid goes missing, walking slow and yelling. Only nobody knows what to yell. Hey. Hello. Can you hear us. One of the twins yells "Bird guy" and then looks at the ground. The tight-haired woman keeps saying "Sir" like he dropped his wallet. We've known him for four days and none of us can call him by name.

Flannel finds the binoculars about two hundred yards out. They're hanging off a honey locust, one of those trees with the big thorns that come right out of the bark in bunches, some of them three, four inches. The strap's looped over a thorn real neat, like a jacket on a hook by the door. Lenses clean.

On the next thorn down there's a fingernail. Whole, pushed onto the point, with the pale curved bit from underneath still stuck to the bottom of it.

Flannel makes a noise and points lower. There's another one under that one. They go all the way down the trunk, one to a thorn, ten of them, big ones on top, little ones at the bottom. Thumb to pinky, left hand then right.

The tight-haired woman looks at them a long time with nothing on her face. Then she turns around and walks back to camp.

No blood anywhere. No tracks. Just the binoculars and the fingernails.

“It comes back for it later”, my father says in my head. “Whenever it feels like it.”

That afternoon we're picking our way down a dry creek bed full of round stones when his voice comes down off the slope to our left. Easy, warm, the same voice that told me about the licorice fern.

"Over here. I've found the trail. It's just up this way."

Everybody stops. The groom takes a step toward the slope and his wife grabs his sleeve.

"And look," the voice says, pleased. "There's a lovely little cardinal up here. Gray as a stone. Do come and see."

Nobody goes. A guy who spent his life with binoculars doesn't call a cardinal gray.

"Do come and see," it says again, exactly the same, same little lift on the end.

We walk faster. It keeps pace with us along the slope for most of an hour, never closer, never further, telling us about birds that aren't there. Around dusk it quits.

That night by the fire Flannel finally says it. I've seen it coming for days, the way he's always a step behind me on the trail.

"None of this was happening," he says, quiet. "Not one bit of it. Not till you walked out of the woods."

Nobody says anything.

"Two-day hike. Easy. Then this guy shows up with no gear worth a damn and a look on him like a kicked dog, and all of a sudden the trail's gone, the map's changing, people hearing things, the old man walks off and leaves his fingernails on a tree." He points across the fire at me. "What's wrong with you, man?"

I open my mouth and nothing comes out. Same as the couch.

"Leave him alone," the Guide says, but he doesn't look at me when he says it.

The tight-hair woman's sitting on her log with her hands folded, staring at the coals, humming. Ava's ringtone. Slow, off-key, like she's trying to remember how it goes.

I don't sleep. I sit up against a tree with my knees pulled in.

The day Dana left she didn't make a scene. She started packing on a Saturday morning while I sat at the kitchen table and she packed all day and I sat there all day. Around four Owen came down in his pajamas with his dinosaur backpack on. He stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at me, then at her.

"Is Daddy sick?"

He asked her, not me. Dana crouched down and fixed one of his straps. "Yeah, bud. Daddy's sick."

He nodded and went and stood by the front door.

After they were gone there was still a drawing of his on the fridge under a pineapple magnet. One of the family ones they make you do at school, Mommy, Daddy, Me, and the Dog, everybody holding hands under a big yellow sun. We don't have a dog. Daddy was down in the corner by himself in gray crayon, not holding anybody's hand. Smaller than the dog.

I left it up there. I walked past it every morning for months. I never looked at it straight on.

In the morning Russ makes rules. He stands by the dead fire with his hands on his hips, like he's back in charge of something.

Nobody goes anywhere alone. Not to take a leak, not to get water, nowhere. You go in twos and you keep the other person where you can see them. Nobody stands watch alone either. Two at a time.

"And if somebody comes back," Flannel says. "Then what."

Nobody wants to answer that.

It's the bride who comes up with the questions. Something only the real person would know. She says it quiet, not looking at anybody, and once it's out there it can't go back in. By noon we're all doing it. The twins go first, rattling stuff back and forth so fast it's almost one of their bits. What was the dog's name. Rascal. What'd Mom drop on Christmas. The ham. Who broke the garage window. You did. No, you did. They grin at each other when they're done, but it isn't the old grin.

The groom gets asked where they went on their first date and says the Olive Garden in Warwick, and she nods and doesn't let go of his hand the rest of the morning.

The tight-hair woman gets asked Ava's birthday. "March ninth," she says, right away, without even looking up. Nobody here knows if that's right. Nobody says so.

Then they get to me.

That's when I see how it is. Nobody here knows one true thing about me. There's no question anybody can ask. I could tell them Owen's birthday, my mother's maiden name, my route number, and not one of them would know if I was lying. Russ looks at me. Flannel looks at me. The bride looks at the ground.

"I was on watch," I say. "When he walked off. I told you. He nodded at me."

"Yeah," Flannel says. "You told us."

They don't tie me up. It gets talked about. I hear Flannel and Russ going back and forth low by the packs when they think I'm asleep, and Russ says no, and Flannel says what if, and Russ says no again, slower. What they do instead is Flannel holds his hand out for my pocketknife. I give it to him. After that I walk up front where everybody can see me.

It's a long day up front. I can feel every one of them back there. When I stop to fix my boot, everybody stops. When I open my mouth to say something, three people flinch.

That afternoon the groom goes down to a creek with one of the twins to fill the bottles, and the twin comes back up first. The groom's maybe two minutes behind him. Two minutes. When he comes up the bank with the bottles, his wife gets up and backs away from him.

"Where were you."

"Right there. I was filling the bottles."

"He was right behind me," the twin says, but he doesn't sound sure.

"Ask me something," the groom says. "Ask me anything. Babe. Come on. Ask me."

She doesn't. She just stands there hugging herself. He sleeps by himself that night on the far side of the fire, and I listen to him cry for a long time. She doesn't go to him. Nobody goes to him.

It was the tight-hair woman who said he should sleep over there. She said it so reasonable. Just for tonight, just to be safe, he'd understand. And he did understand. That was the worst part.

The next two days we start running into what I end up calling the larder. Just in my head. Nobody wants the old man's words right now.

A raccoon stuck through on a broken sapling at head height, hands curled up. A crow pushed down on a thorn so hard its wings are flat out on both sides. A fox up in a pine with the branch coming out of its open mouth.

Then we come down into a little valley where a big spruce has fallen over and is leaning up out of the ground at an angle, all the branches broken down to gray stubs. There's deer on it. Six. A buck, three does, two yearlings, slid down onto that trunk one after the other, nose to tail, the wood going in each one's chest and out its back and into the next one. Biggest at the top. The littlest one's hooves are just brushing the leaves.

Their heads are all turned the same way. At the trail.

We have to go right under them. There's no other way through. I keep my eyes on the boots in front of me.

All of it's been peeled a little. Strip here, flap there, skin lifted to see underneath. None of it has flies.

The second afternoon we walk into a clearing where somebody camped a long time ago. There's an old canvas tent, the A-frame kind with wood poles, rotted down into a gray-green pile in the leaves with one pole still sticking up. An external-frame pack against a stump, the aluminum gone white. A tin coffee pot. A pair of black-framed glasses folded on a rock.

On a hawthorn at the edge there's a paper hunting license stuck on a thorn. Most of the ink's gone. I get down close and squint. Nineteen eighty-three.

"Look up," the tight-hair woman says behind me. Calm. Like she's telling us it's going to rain.

The trees around that clearing are full of skins. They're hanging off the branches like laundry. Long stiff gray-brown things moving a little in the wind. Deer, bear, some I can't make out. Four, maybe five of

them have arms and legs. The holes where the faces were are stretched open. Some are so old you can almost see light through them.

Some of them aren't old.

The groom throws up. His wife holds onto his shoulders, looking up with her mouth open. One twin's saying no, no, no under his breath and the other one turns him around by the shoulders so he doesn't have to look.

The Guide just stands there.

"We're not the first," he says, mostly to himself. "Not even close."

First true thing out of him since the fork.

Fifth day, I think, he tells me his name.

We're resting at the top of a ravine, a long raw cut in the side of the mountain, maybe sixty feet down, full of deadfall and busted rock with a little water running along the bottom. He sits down heavy next to me with that map he still carries and never opens. The sunburn's peeling off his nose in white flakes.

"Russ," he says. "Russell Doane. Figured I never said. Seems like a guy ought to know that before…"

He doesn't finish it.

"Clyde."

"I know." He almost smiles. "Eleven years I've done this. Never lost a client. Never been late. I keep going back to that first fork. If I'd just said I wasn't sure."

I don't tell him I know. I think he knows I know.

The twins tell me theirs that day too. They're up on a boulder by the edge splitting the last strip of jerky down the middle real careful. Theodore and Tobias, Theo and Toby. Their mom was a church lady, Toby says, big on Bible names. Theo says she was the only one ever allowed to call him Teddy. At her funeral, standing right by the hole, he made Toby put his hand on the casket and swear he'd never try it.

"And I never have," Toby says. "Not one time. Even when he had it coming."

Theo shoves him and for a second they've both got the old grin on at the same time.

It's the tight-hair woman who looks over the edge. She makes a little sound, air out of a tire, and backs up with her hands over her mouth.

At the bottom of the ravine there's a dead pine. The top's snapped off and weathered down to a point. There's a black bear on it, run through belly to back, slammed down so hard the wood came out between the shoulders. Four hundred pounds, easy. The big paws are hanging. Its mouth is open.

Its face is gone. The whole head's been skinned, one piece, the way you'd peel an orange if you were trying not to break it. What's left is the red skull and the muscle and the teeth, eyes bulging with no lids.

Then, behind us, the old man says, "There you all are. I've been looking everywhere."

It's him. That's what I can't get past. The beard, the fleece, that little smile, the binoculars back around his neck on their soft strap. He's thirty feet off at the edge of the trees with his hands tucked up in his armpits like he's cold.

"Oh thank God," Russ says, and takes a step.

"Don't," says Flannel.

The old man stops. He looks hurt. That's the thing. He looks hurt the way any old man would. "I went to relieve myself and I got turned around," he says. "I fell. Down a gully, a steep one. I've been trying to find you for three days. I'm seventy-three years old." His voice cracks. "I've been drinking out of puddles."

"We found your binoculars," Flannel says. "Hanging on a tree."

"Yes. I found them too, this morning, on the way here." He touches them. "Somebody's been doing that, haven't they? Hanging things up. I've seen it. I thought I was losing my mind." He looks at us one at a time. "I've heard voices out there. I'm sure you have too."

The bride starts crying. Daniel's got a water bottle in his hand, already half held out.

"The fingernails," Flannel says. "We found your fingernails, old man."

He takes his hands out from under his arms. The ends of all ten fingers are raw and pink and wet. "I climbed out of that gully on my hands," he says, real quiet. "What do you think that does?"

Nobody says anything. It's a good answer. I stand there and I can feel how good an answer it is.

Then he looks at me.

"I'll tell you what I saw that night," he says. "Since you're all looking at each other. I'll tell you who was out in the trees when I went off. He was standing behind me. I could hear him breathing." He doesn't point. He doesn't need to. "Ask him where he was."

Everybody turns. Russ. Flannel. The twins. The bride with her hand over her mouth.

"I was on watch," I say. "I was at the fire. You nodded at me."

"And who else was awake?" he says, gentle. "Nobody. That's who."

"That's true," says the tight-hair woman. Calm. Reasonable. "He was the only one up."

Flannel's got my knife out. I didn't see him open it.

Maybe I'd have let it happen. There's a part of me that might've believed it too, everybody looking at me the way Owen looked at me from behind his mother's legs. But I'm looking at the old man, and the old man isn't blinking. He hasn't blinked once since he walked out of the trees.

"Look at him," I say horror gripping my voice. "Look at his eyes. He's not blinking."

Then the wind comes up out of the ravine and brings the smell, the rotten sweet smell, so strong I can taste it, and everybody gets it at the same time. I watch it go across their faces one after the other.

Daniel's still holding out the water.

"Do come and see," the old man says.

Then something moves under his jacket.

Not him. Under him. The fleece bulges out at the chest, sinks back, bulges again somewhere else, lower, like a cat moving around under a blanket. His smile doesn't change. His hands stay folded. The lump goes up into his throat and his neck swells out on one side, the skin going tight and shiny, and I hear something in there creak.

Then he splits open.

It starts at the breastbone. There's a sound like somebody ripping a tarp in half by hand, slow, and a line opens down the front of his jacket and down the front of him, up his throat, down through his belly. There's no blood. I keep waiting for blood. What comes out of the split is clear and thick, like the jelly in a can of ham, and it runs down the front of his pants in sheets.

The two sides of him peel back. Not torn, peeled, the way you'd open a sleeping bag. And inside there isn't anything that should be inside a man. It's gray, and it's folded. That's the part I can't get rid of. It's folded up in there tight as a parachute in a pack, knees jammed up under where his ribs should be, arms doubled over three and four times, everything packed down wet and pressed flat. A whole other thing, squeezed into an old man like stuffing into a turkey.

Then it unpacks itself.

One arm comes out first, pushing up through the split in his collarbone, and the arm keeps coming, and coming, and every couple of feet there's another joint that has to straighten, and each one pops when it goes. Loud. Like somebody cracking their knuckles right in your ear. Pop, and a length of arm swings free. Pop, and another. The old man's skin stretches around it while it pulls through, thin as a balloon, so thin I can see the gray moving underneath, and then it slides out and the skin goes slack again.

The old man's head tips backward. His face is still on it. Still smiling. Something underneath his face is pushing up, and his features slide back off his skull and bunch at the back of his neck like a hood. The binoculars swing.

The back comes out next, hunched, a long gray curve rising up out of him with the knobs of a spine as big as fists running down it. It has to work to get its shoulders through. It twists side to side, the way you'd shimmy out of a wetsuit, and his skin makes a wet sucking noise every time it moves. There's steam coming off it. It's a cold morning and it's steaming, like something just pulled out of an oven.

It pulls a leg up out of him the way you pull your boot out of deep mud. There's a long smack when it comes loose. Then the other one. When the last foot comes out, the old man just falls down. Empty. He folds in the middle and drops in the leaves like a coat somebody stepped out of, a flat pile of fleece and old skin with the beard face-up on top. His wristwatch is still on. I can see the second hand going.

I think about that watch a lot. I don't know why that's the thing I remember clearest.

The rest of it uncurls the rest of the way, slow, like it's stretching after a long sleep. When it's all the way up it's nine feet tall, easy. It has to bend its neck to look at us from under the branches.

The skin's gray. Fish-belly gray, the color of something that's never been out in the sun. It's slick all over with that clear jelly, and when it moves the stuff strings between its arms and its sides and snaps. There's no fat on it anywhere. It's all cords and tendons, long ropy muscle right under the skin, you can see what it's going to do an instant before it does it. Here and there the skin's still creased from being folded, deep lines pressed into it, the way your arm looks when you've slept on it wrong. The creases are smoothing out while I watch.

There's fur on it in patches. Pelts, pseudo-sewn onto the gray. Coarse black bear over one shoulder. The doe's brown hide across the ribs, a long strip, and I know exactly which doe. A raccoon tail hanging off one hip. Fox red at the back of the neck. Some patches with no fur at all, just pale wrinkled spotty skin with thin white hairs on it, the back of an old man's hand. Where the patches meet the gray it's puckered and raw and weeping.

The arms hang almost to its knees. The fingers are as long as my forearm, skinny, too many joints, and on the ends there's talons, pale yellow, black packed up under them like a gravedigger's nails. I know those fingers. I know what they sound like on nylon.

Up behind its shoulders there's two stubs of meat, maybe two feet long, gray, no feathers. They're still crumpled from being packed in. While I watch they twitch and flap and kind of shake themselves out, the way a moth's wings do when it first comes out. They don't do anything. They just move.

The head's long and narrow. It jerks around in little snaps, tilts one way, snaps to the other, like a robin on a lawn. The eyes are small and black and set way back. There's no white to them.

It opens its mouth, and the jaw keeps going down after it should stop. The teeth are yellow going brown at the roots, every one about the size of my pinky, blunt, two and three rows deep, like somebody pushed them into its gums by the handful. Then the tongue comes out over the bottom row. It's as thick as a roll of quarters, purple-gray, swollen, ringed with ridges, a fat nightcrawler that's been sitting in a puddle too long. It comes out a foot. Two. The tip feels at the air.

The smell rolls over us so heavy I gag. I gag, and I bring up nothing, because there isn't anything in me to bring up. My legs won't move. I'm aware, in a far-off way, that I've wet myself.

From down inside its chest, in the old man's voice, it says, "Do come and see."

It doesn't run. It's in the trees and then it's in the middle of us, like a skip in a tape.

The groom's standing next to me and then he's not. There's a heavy wet sound and a gust of that smell and his wife's screaming "Daniel, Daniel," which is how I found out his name. Then she goes too, straight up into the branches, a sound like a sail tearing. Something warm comes down through the leaves after her and lands on my face and my hands. I don't look at it.

Russ goes at it. I'll keep that till I die. Russell Doane, who got us lost and talked too much and never once said I don't know, goes straight at that thing with nothing in his hand but his map. It gets those fingers

around him and folds him up into itself and I hear his bones go, a lot of them, fast, popping, one after the other.

I turn to run and it gets me.

I don't see it. I feel it. One of those talons catches me up top by my left shoulder blade and drags, all the way down my back and across, to the bottom of my ribs on the other side. Slow. It takes its time. It goes through my jacket and my shirt like they're wet paper and then it's in me.

I've been hurt before. I broke my wrist on a patch of ice on the route one January and drove myself to the ER with it in my lap. This isn't that. This is white. That's the only word I've got for it. White, and loud. It goes through every nerve I own at once, like grabbing a live wire, my fingertips, my teeth, the backs of my eyes, all of it buzzing, my whole body lit up and humming with it. My legs quit. I'm on my knees and I don't remember getting there. Somebody's screaming and it takes me a second to realize it's me.

Then there's a hand in my collar hauling me up. Flannel. My knife's still in his other hand. He drags me three steps before my legs remember what they're for.

Then we're running.

We go along the edge of the ravine as fast as we can, branches in our faces, roots grabbing our boots, the drop right there on our left. I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going.

Behind us the woods are full of voices. Russ. Daniel. The bride. The old man. Calling us back, come see, I found the trail, over here. Saying our names and getting them wrong. Clive. Clyde. Father.

I look back once. I shouldn't.

Back in the trunks, standing so still I took them for dead trees, there's more. Three. Four, maybe. Gray, slick, pelts hanging off them loose, every head tipped over at the same angle, watching us go. One of them's got something on its head. A man's face, stretched over that long skull, the eyeholes slipping, the mouth hanging open. A Halloween mask on a kid that's too big for it.

They aren't chasing us. They just watch our pitiful escape.

Further back, way back where the trees get too thick for the light, there's something else. I see it for maybe half a second. I think it's a hill. Then it moves. I'm not going to say any more about it than that, except that it makes the ones in front of it look young.

It's got something on it too. Something big.

I don't look again.

Toby falls.

We're running single file right along the edge and his boot catches on a root and he just tips over sideways, arms going, this surprised look on his face. Theo spins and grabs for his hand and gets air.

I hear him land. It isn't loud. I hear him yell "Theo" once.

Theo would've gone right over after him if Flannel and me hadn't grabbed the back of his jacket. He fights us like an animal, kicking, screaming, clawing our arms till his fingernails tear into my sleeve. He almost gets loose twice.

Then all at once he quits. Hangs there between us with his eyes open, looking down at the little dark shape at the bottom.

He doesn't say anything else that day. He walks where we lead him.

All afternoon, from the far side of the ravine, something in Toby's voice keeps calling his brother's name.

Part Four: Pinned

Toby comes back the sixth morning.

Only four of us remain: Theo, Flannel, the woman with the tight hair, and me. We squat in a rocky hollow without a fire, nobody sleeping, just waiting on daylight. Theo hasn't shifted an inch all night. His fingertips are crusted over from where his nails tore loose.

My back is in bad shape. I can't see the wound, but Flannel took a look by the fading light yesterday and didn't say a word, which told me everything I needed to know. My shirt has dried right into the flesh. Every movement pulls at it, and every pull brings back that white, buzzing sting—not as sharp, but lingering like it's waiting to flare up again. Heat radiates across my skin; I suspect I'm running a fever.

I am the first to catch sight of him. A flat blanket of white fog lies still between the trunks, and a figure comes stepping right out of it.

He looks whole. I heard him hit the ground, and nobody survives a fall like that. Yet here he walks—jacket torn, dirt smeared across his cheeks, not a mark on him—striding just like Toby, wearing that same Toby grin.

His skin isn't right, though. It fits him wrong, loose around the wrists and bunched up at the elbows. It's pulled so tight over his forehead that it gleams, hiking his eyebrows up into a look of permanent, happy surprise. When he waves, his fingers react a second behind his hand.

"Guys," he says. "Guys. It's me."

Flannel springs up, my pocketknife drawn. "Hold it right there."

"Dale, come on." He halts anyway, raising his hands, his fingers trailing the motion a beat late. "I hit water. There's a deep pool under all that brush, I fell straight into it. Knocked the wind out of me so bad I couldn't yell. I dragged myself out and slept in a hollow log. I've been calling out for you guys all night. Didn't you hear me?"

We heard him. We heard that voice all night long.

"Nobody walks away from a drop like that," Flannel says.

"So what, you'd rather I be dead? You want me dead, Dale?" He lets out a laugh that almost sounds like Toby's. "Theo. Theo, tell him."

Theo gets to his feet, trembling, staring at his brother like a man dying of thirst looking at a well.

"His skin," I manage to say, my voice raspy as gravel. "Look at his skin."

"Look at your own," Toby snaps back. "Look at your back, man. You've been soaking your shirt in blood for a whole day. You were right there when the old man walked off." He shifts his eyes to Flannel. "You really taking his word over mine?"

I watch Flannel weigh it in his head. I see the blade angle toward me by a couple of inches.

"Let him sit down," the tight-hair woman says quietly. "He's half-frozen. Just look at him."

Toby grins at his brother, broad and unbothered, opening his arms.

"Come here, Teddy," he says. "Come on. You know it's me, don't you?"

Theo moves before I can grab his coat. His expression completely shatters, a half-laugh, half-sob breaking from his chest as he stumbles across the rocks with reaching hands.

Then he freezes.

I watch the realization hit him. Teddy. I watch him remember the church, the open grave, his brother's palm pressed firm against the casket.

The thing wearing Toby cocks its head. It tilts until its ear nearly touches its shoulder, the neck popping like a green branch under pressure.

"What's wrong, Teddy?"

Then Toby splits wide open.

It begins at his mouth. The smile keeps stretching past the corners, past the joint of his jaw, the skin pulling thin enough to reveal the gray mass underneath. Then his face tears along the cheekbones with the sound of wet paper splitting. The tear rushes down his throat and chest, popping the zipper of his jacket open tooth by tooth all the way down.

Theo stands barely four feet away, taking in every single sound.

Long gray fingers emerge first from Toby's neck, hooking over his shoulder blades with multi-jointed arms folded tight. They pull with deliberate force, like a swimmer hauling himself onto a dock. Toby's actual arms go limp, swinging uselessly as his shoulders stretch wide beyond human limits, skin straining over whatever is shoving its way out until they turn into empty sleeves of hanging flesh.

The head forces its way up through Toby's chest. The gap is too narrow, so it wriggles side to side, making Toby's ribs snap with a wet noise I refuse to describe. When it finally breaks free, it rises all at once, slick and steaming in the cold air, turning to survey the woods like a swimmer surfacing for breath.

Then it begins to unfold. It just keeps extending, joints popping in sequence—knees, hips, a spine long as a canoe opening up vertebra by vertebra—while its lower half remains tangled in his body. Toby's legs dangle off it like discarded waders, his sneakers still laced, toes dragging through the leaves. It steps out

of him, lifting one slender leg out of the husk like a man stepping out of work pants, letting the empty skin puddle on the ground, then stepping free with the other, standing nine feet tall while clear slime drips off it in ropes.

Toby's face is the last piece to detach. It remains plastered to the front of the creature's skull, stretched wide, the grin distended, swinging from a single flap under the chin as if still smiling down at his brother. Then it tears away completely, landing face-up in the dead leaves right at Theo's boots.

The monster peers down at him, its head twitching in sharp, birdlike snaps. A fat, ringed yellow tongue snakes out from between its teeth, hovering an inch from Theo's cheek to sample his breath.

The noise Theo lets out isn't a scream. I wish to God it had been a scream.

Then the mist shifts, and it is gone.

Toby's skin lies there in the leaves like discarded laundry. Theo drops to his knees beside it, rocking back and forth as he whispers his brother's name.

We leave everything behind. We grab what gear we can and run, Flannel and I dragging Theo between us while the tight-hair woman follows behind, strangely composed.

For the first time since that missed fork, the terrain slopes downward and stays down. The timber thins out, letting light through. A faded yellow blaze appears on a mossy maple—I could have dropped to my knees and kissed it. Then a small rock cairn, followed by another mark on the trees.

Yet the larder doesn't stop. It just creeps closer to civilization.

Barely a quarter-mile from the road, a yellow Labrador hangs by its collar from an oak branch, caught on a jagged stub with its hind paws suspended inches above the dirt. It hasn't been touched otherwise. A tiny brass bone tag reads BUSTER beside a phone number; somebody out there is probably still pinning up lost dog signs.

Past the hound, the forest gives way to an open pasture. A Holstein cow is impaled on top of a sharp cedar fence post, shoved down through the stomach until the wood protrudes between her shoulders. She hovers four feet up, legs dangling, a yellow tag reading 214 in her ear. Beyond the wire, a barn roof rises in the distance, while the rest of the herd sits jammed into the far corner of the field, facing away from us, refusing to graze.

Then I hear it—faint, but unmistakable over the silence. The hum of tires on asphalt.

Within earshot of the highway, near enough to smell engine exhaust, Flannel halts and reaches a hand toward me.

"Dale," he says, unable to look me in the eye. "For what it's worth... I had you wrong. I just needed someone to blame."

"Clyde," I reply, shaking it. His grip is rough and warm.

He nods, stepping off the path behind a thick maple to relieve himself.

He never comes back out. I wait a minute, then call out his real name—Dale. When I round the trunk, there's no sign of him. Just dirt and leaves. Caught on a barb of bark at chest height is a three-inch square of torn red flannel.

The cloth is still warm when I touch it.

Turning around, I see Theo is gone too. He's already fifty yards off, trekking back up the slope toward the mist with a steady stride, his head tilted as if listening to a quiet voice.

"Theo!" I shout. "Theo!"

He never turns around. The fog swallows him whole, and I don't go after him.

That leaves just me and the woman with the tight hair.

She talks continuously down the final stretch, and I let her—I need the sound of a human voice. She mentions how frantic her boys must be, sitting by the telephone, and how she can't wait to get back home and wrap her arms around her two big boys.

I stop in my tracks.

On that first night, she passed her phone around the fire. Ava, age nine, braids done crooked. The cartoon ringtone she wept over in the dark.

I glance back at the trail. The earth is damp from the fog, showing only a single set of boot prints behind us.

I remember the break on day two—the bride's voice spilling out of her throat, how silent she grew afterward, how indifferently she walked past the fingernails on the tree. I remember how reasonable she sounded whenever we needed to push someone out into the cold, and how she hummed that song by the embers, trying to recall the tune.

I turn around. She is right behind me, smiling.

A faint red seam runs along her hairline like a fresh paper cut. As I watch, it creeps down past her temple and ear, oozing small beads of gray fluid.

"Mommy's coming home," she says, her voice suddenly that of a young girl. "Mommy's coming home real soon."

The stench hits me all at once.

I bolt. I tear down the last ridge through the brush, my ruined heel screaming in my boot while my back splits open again, sending hot blood down into my trousers. Behind me, that long, wet tearing sound starts up, followed by the slow popping of something unfolding, and unfolding.

It doesn't give chase. I keep waiting for cold talons on my neck, but they never arrive. Nothing comes after me. Nothing even tries.

The parking area looks identical to when I left it: the gravel, the wooden kiosk, my car with the prescription pills locked in the glove box, the white outfitter van caked in road dirt, and the barberry bush at the edge.

A cruiser sits nearby with its lightbar flashing, casting slow sweeps of red and blue across the trees.

A forest ranger alerted them after noticing the van had been parked four days past the group's scheduled return. Two officers are there—an older guy with a gray mustache and a younger one with a shaved head. They treat me decently at first, wrapping me in a foil blanket, handing me a water bottle, and sitting me on the bumper. What's your name, sir? Were you part of the group? Where are the others?

Then the older cop runs my name through dispatch.

I can't make out the squawk of the radio, but I don't need to. I watch his face harden as he listens, looking from me to the empty van, then back to the dark treeline. Nine people went up that trail.

The younger officer steps behind me and whispers, "Jesus," as he notices the blood. He lifts the edge of the blanket. "Sir, what happened to your back?"

I tell him the truth, which turns out to be the absolute worst thing I could say.

I try explaining the doe stuck in the oak, the moose, the bear down in the ravine, the skins draped like laundry, the 1983 hunting license, and the fingernails. I tell them about the thing that slides inside a person to wear them before bursting out, and the voices calling from the brush.

They trade a look over the hood of the car. I know that look. Every word out of my mouth just seals it.

They put me in the back seat. They aren't rough about it—the younger one shields my head so I don't hit the frame. The door clicks shut, smelling of old coffee and vinyl. Up front, the radio static hums low, just like my own car on the drive up.

Then a voice cries out from the woods: "Help!"

It's Theo's voice—desperate, cracking. "Please, somebody! I'm hurt, I can't walk, please help me!"

Both officers snap to attention, the younger one unholstering his flashlight.

"That's one of them," he says. "That's one of the missing hikers."

I slam my fists against the partition, screaming until my voice tears. "Don't go in there! It's not him! Don't go in there!" They glance back at me through the glass—just the lunatic locked in the back seat—and then turn away.

"Clyde!" The voice calls closer now, sweeter. "Clyde, tell them! Tell them I'm right here!"

I stop beating on the window.

Theo never called me Clyde. Neither twin ever did. From the moment I sat down at their fire, I was only ever the Postman.

The officers push past the kiosk into the dark woods, their flashlight beams bouncing off the trunks, shrinking smaller and smaller until the trees consume them entirely.

Silence settles over the lot. The radio continues its low hiss while red and blue lights sweep rhythmically over the gravel, the van, and the treeline.

They sweep across the barberry bush.

The bird is still there. Same bird, perched in the exact same spot, its dark eye-stripe cutting across its face as it cocks its head toward me through the glass.

The thorns beneath it are crowded now. The grasshopper remains, dried and papery, alongside a field mouse, a little sparrow with a limp neck, a beetle still feebly kicking its legs, a scrap of red flannel, and a small tuft of gray beard.

Right near the top, one long spike sits empty.

My father's words at the wire fence echo in my head. It hangs up its catch, and comes back for it later.

Whenever it feels like it.

The bird sits unmoving. It isn't in any hurry at all. It knows right where to find me.

Patient little bastard.