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# We Eat This Gold

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WE EAT THIS GOLD

by

Chris Drew

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English

at

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August 2014

ABSTRACT  
WE EAT THIS GOLD

by

Chris Drew

The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2014  
Under the Supervision of Professor Liam Callanan

*We Eat This Gold* is a novel set in a small coal mining community in southwestern Indiana. Centered around a son's return to his father's house after a failed music career in Nashville, the novel explores the subtle social structures of rural America, the slow decline of modern coal communities, and the often oversimplified beliefs, worries, and biases found in small towns. It also seeks to provide a realistic portrayal of the inner workings and broader culture of an active underground coal mine, as well as explore the ramifications, both economic and psychological, of serious workplace injuries sustained in such an environment. This dissertation also includes a critical introduction analyzing the particular concerns involved with approaching rurality as both subject and setting in American literature, and how noted American novelists have chosen to characterize and present rural settings.

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## DEDICATION

Many individuals were instrumental in the creation of this dissertation. My heartfelt thanks go out to the following people:

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## Introduction

In addition to typical novel-construction challenges such as character creation, plot momentum, and thematic layering, writing *We Eat This Gold* has presented a difficulty that occurs throughout my writing and continues to require focused attention. In all of my fiction (and most of my nonfiction), I have chosen to write about the same geographic place at different times and from disparate points of view. This has been done before, of course, and by more accomplished writers. William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County is generally analogous to what I have attempted, with its limited geography and knotted ball of recurring characters, though I also find literary kinship with the works of Louise Erdrich. Her repeated and changing characterizations of the upper Midwest and Plains states in her novels go about the same work I am interested in—capturing the essence of a place and presenting it as a something approaching a character.

Where I have (perhaps incautiously) broken with the approaches of writers such as Faulkner and Erdrich is in my decision to set *We Eat This Gold*, as well as my other fiction, in the real place where I was born and raised—Pike County, Indiana. I appreciate the freedom that comes with focusing on loosely fictional places such as Jefferson or Argus, but the decision to write about the real Pike County, full of towns and roads that can be found in Rand McNally, felt necessary when I began writing. One of the early *bon*

*mots* handed to writers is to “write what you know.” I took the advice literally. At first, I did so because it felt safer, but soon I found that the details I embedded in stories about an unremarkable and occasionally backward patch of the Midwest delighted my workshop mates and other non-Hoosier readers. For example, the idea of “coming cars” (hiding near highways and throwing hardened field corn onto the windshields of passing vehicles during the Halloween season) had ceased to fascinate by the time I went to college. To readers, though, it revealed an oddly specific bit of culture from a region they usually flew over. It also fascinated them more than the flattish characters in my early fiction. Seeing an opportunity, I used these details to buoy my craft as I continued to refine my work into complex fiction. By the time I wrote the first story I considered successful, I found that Pike County had moved from entertaining detail-provider to fully established character in an ongoing project I had only become aware of after writing several linked stories.

As I continued writing, I read craft essays by writers similarly interested in place, and I quickly found Eudora Welty, whose essay “Place in Fiction” asks an important question:

Should the writer, then, write about home? It is both natural and sensible that the place where we have our roots should become the setting, the first and primary proving ground, of our fiction. Location, however, is not simply to be used by the writer—it is to be discovered, as each novel itself, in the act of writing, is discovery. Discovery does not imply that the place is new, only that we are. Place is as old as the hills. Kilroy at least has been there, and left his name. Discovery, not being a matter of writing



our name on a wall, but of seeing what that wall is, and what is over it, is a matter of vision. (55)

Here, I found articulation of the purpose I had been stumbling toward—not simply sharing the place where I grew up, but working through a process of discovering (or rediscovering) it, both for myself and for my reader, whether they had been to Indiana or not. Each time I sat down to write a new Pike County story, I attempted that discovery from different angles, through the eyes of children, women, men, sons, daughters, farmers, miners, and widows, all existing at different moments and locations in the history of the county.

This discovery began to shape my larger project, limiting it in ways, but also bringing the focus that comes with limitation. By the time I began drafting *We Eat This Gold*, I knew much of what I wanted to accomplish in the novel. I wanted to provide a broader sense of the places in and around Pike County, both geographically and atmospherically, much more so than the brief characterizations in my other stories. I wanted to give the reader a sense of the unique coal mining culture of the region, which is neither as oppressive as those found in Appalachia, nor as professional and modern as those found west of the Mississippi. I wanted to capture the cultural moment of the place and its inhabitants—a moment in which the lone, dominant industry of the region has faded, and nothing can replace it. I wanted to hang the weight of place on the characters, showing that they are who they are because of (or because of resistance toward) Pike County.

Considering these goals, I began to feel a similar weight. Specifically, that of accurately characterizing a place that someone can visit and verify. Yoknapatawpha is

Faulkner's South, not the historian's or the cartographer's. My Pike County is on the map, and though I have taken strategic liberties with it, I can't stray too far. As Henry James wrote, "To name a place, in fiction, is to pretend in some degree to represent it" (Lutwack 29). In *We Eat This Gold*, this responsibility has quietly and repeatedly asserted itself throughout the writing process. I have attempted to present Pike County not as simply a rural place, or as a representative sample of southern Indiana, but as a singular location different from other rural characterizations in literature, distinctive even within its own geography. In other words, Winslow, Campbelltown, Petersburg, and Arthur are similar, but they should not appear on the page as the same generic small town, and they should read as clearly different from Jefferson, Argus, Winesburg, or Hannibal.

While crafting this differentiation, however, I have also kept in mind that the novel is part of a robust tradition of American rural fiction. Generally speaking, Welty's assertion that "Kilroy at least has been there, and has left his name" can be applied not only to the locales found in fiction, but also to the rural landscapes portrayed throughout the history of American fiction. While other geographic and sociological categories have received more systematic study in English departments, rural writers have visited and returned to unsettled places and small towns in American fiction from its beginning as a literary form. A cursory evaluation of these visits and returns has been useful in understanding the position of my own work in the broader rural context.

American literature largely began with Washington Irving's *Sketchbook*—the first sustained work from the colonies taken seriously by European critics. With its frequent focus on the rural places of what would become New York State, it also represents the beginning of (non-Native) rural American literature. Much early American fiction

focused on rural locations, specifically as representations of Westward expansion and the accompanying origin myths of the Western frontier and its heroic inhabitants. As Richard Slotkin writes, “In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness” (4). While this mythogenesis contained many errors, works as disparate as Irving’s *Sketchbook*, Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, Twain’s *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, or even Wister’s *The Virginian* wrote, revised, and established the myth of the various American frontiers and their accompanying rural settlements.

As industry and cities came to replace the frontier, however, accompanying demographic shifts moved the focus both nationally and literarily to urban areas. Authors such as Henry James continued to focus on the particulars of American place, but those places became bustling city streets and Victorian parlors. As the focus on the rural waned, authors who continued to write about small towns and “unspoiled” places began to do so under the loose banner of regionalism, or “local color” fiction. This writing largely commodified the rural experience for export to urban readers, and many of its authors found such export most easily (and lucratively) accomplished through reductive characterization, essentialism, and easy laughs. However, the best local color writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett, often transcended these reductions and communicated the complications of changing rural landscapes, both geographically and psychologically.

By the time Modernism came to dominate American literature, unifying characteristics of rural writing had largely dissolved. For Hemingway, the wilds of upper

Michigan represented a healing balm for war-weary protagonists, while for Faulkner, the ghosts of the Southern Gothic landscape provided a vehicle to wrestle with the sins of the South. Outside (and sometimes inside) of fiction, writers began to approach the rural almost anthropologically. James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* captures Southern sharecroppers in a style both journalistic and creative, while never committing fully to either. Similar approaches were taken in documenting American Indian cultures, and by the 1960s anthropologists largely controlled the study of Indian literatures. (It's worth noting, though, that the earliest Euro-American rural literatures were built largely around the idea of heroically battling Indians for European access to land, while American Indian authors such as Erdrich are now necessary in any serious discussion of American rural literature.)

The most recent "unified" moment of rural fiction in American culture, however brief and unsound, came in the 1980s under the banner of "Hick Chic," a term coined by Jonathan Yardley in a 1985 *Washington Post* article. In it, he takes "urban faddists" to task for their superficial interest in rural lifestyles and issues. He writes that these urban and suburban co-opters of rurality through literature and material culture

haven't fastened on Hick Chic out of any inherent merit or interest that they discern in it, but because they see it as yet another product with which to bedeck their lives. The real life of the countryside is as distant to them as the real life of Jupiter, perhaps even more so, and even if it were right at hand it would hold no appeal for them. What they like is the *idea* of the country and the various artifacts associated with it. (C2)

In a sense, the Hick Chic movement of the '80s simply echoed the local color and regionalism of eighty years earlier, though it replaced the idea of literary tourism—reading about places instead of undertaking the considerable effort of visiting them—with a sort of literary ornamentation in which readers bedeck themselves in rural issues and their outward manifestations as something resembling a fashion choice.

Unfortunately, this movement temporarily absorbed or shunted a number of important works of rural American fiction, some of which never fully separated themselves from the tackier aspects of Hick Chic. Others, however, broke free of the momentary fad and stand as stark reminders of rural existence in the post-industrial 1980s. Writers such as Russell Banks, Jim Harrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, Larry McMurtry, and Toni Morrison found their books on one hand serving as conversation pieces on the coffee tables of urbanites with little real interest in complex social issues, but on the other hand (and more permanently) serving notice that the idealized rural American past had been largely lost and replaced by a decaying present showing little sign of improvement. At the time, sharper-eyed critics saw the lasting impact instead of the trendy one. As Ann Hulbert wrote,

The novelists convey the sense of fading pride, diluted with mounting disappointment, that comes with passing on a rural inheritance that seems a dead-weight rather than an anchor of independence. And they raise doubts about the treasured notion that rural folk, who forgo the urban competition for success, thrive on a spirit of cooperation instead. The solitude of life on the land comes as no surprise, of course, and for some

it's a great solace. But the loneliness in these books is not always liberating. (30)

Since the 1980s, rural fiction has performed many of its previous roles simultaneously. In some cases, it is written as social criticism, while in others it has served as an elegy, sometimes sentimental and sometimes scathing, of an imagined and unspoiled paradise slowly lost to time. It still serves as literary tourism, and also as a complex and shifting symbol of the American experience. Rural writers themselves have also gained critical consideration in relation to the regions they examine. The most important aspect of rural American fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is perhaps its continuing malleability in filling whatever role or approach arises. Certainly, I have adapted several of these uses in writing *We Eat This Gold*, and there are three worth exploring further, both in my own writing and in that of other contemporary writers: the symbolic connection between rural locations and maternity, the position of the author in relation to the rural, and the role of rural writing in cultural exploration and analysis.

### **The Rural Maternal**

In American cultural memory, the concept of “home” has come to be connected with the idea, however variable, of the rural. That isn't to say that every American thinks of Twain's small towns and picket fences when they consider their origins, but rather that, as a nation, our roots are tied to a rural ideal. Annette Kolodny writes that “America's oldest and most cherished fantasy” is “a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine” (4). She presents the rural spaces and landscapes of the national myth as an idealized feminine

entity, ready to be claimed and nurtured, and in return, to nurture its inhabitants. In other words, the uniquely open and explorable spaces of the United States, nearly from its inception, have come to symbolize a sort of maternity in which the land offers sustenance, discipline, and advancement.

The danger here, as with any structuralist approach to literature, is that the myth underlying the ideal can overreach. Certainly, as Cormac McCarthy, James Dickey, and others have demonstrated, there are more menacing ways to view the less-developed places of our country, but the idea of the maternal rural holds a special place in our national psyche, even when subverted. Much of the literature dealing with the rural experience suggests that our relationships to these places, both individually and collectively, are based on what Hawthorne calls our “natal spot” (13), the place of our origin to which we may or may not be able to return.

A useful example of this concept is Rudolfo Anaya’s 1972 novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. While its rugged, borderland locations in the Southwest are not of Kolodny’s idyllic variety, the issues she raises are central to the book. The idea of “home” is set in turbulent motion in the opening pages, as we are told that the father of Antonio, the book’s protagonist, has deigned to move his family to the small town of Guadalupe, severing his intimate connection with the excitement and lawlessness of the nearby llano on which he grew up. Antonio tells us that “it hurt my father’s pride” (2) and that his father “was never close to the men of the town” (3). From this point forward, *Bless Me, Ultima* is intimately interested not only in Antonio’s family, but in his family’s connection to the various places they call home.

The separation anxiety experienced by Antonio's father is quickly set against a similar (but oppositional) separation felt by Antonio's mother, who, by marrying Antonio's father has been forced to move away from the rest of her Luna family, who have farmed a small valley for generations. Of Antonio's family's yearly trip back to his mother's home to help the Lunas with the harvest, we are told, "it was the only time during the year when [Antonio's mother] was with her brothers, [and] then she was Luna again" (45). Despite her decision to marry a vaquero and move away, her family welcomes her return each year, perhaps explaining her unerring view that "the world would be saved if the people turn to the earth" (27). For Antonio's mother, the home of the farm is a nurturing place that helps her fully understand and articulate her worldview.

It would be easy, then, to suggest that the rough llano life preferred by Antonio's father is the paternal opposing force to his mother's maternal, farm-centric ideas. However, despite some rugged descriptions, Anaya also portrays the llano as feminine in key moments. The father speaks of its "beauty," and is forced to sell his "small herd" of animals when they move into town, stripping himself of the same caretaking identity Anaya uses to characterize the land (2). While Antonio's father is geographically closer to his natal spot, the tragedy of his character is that he cannot reclaim it, focusing his energies instead on a half-formed, ultimately fruitless dream of taking his family to California.

These oppositional forces create the central struggle for Antonio in the novel, but instead of having him navigate alone, Anaya presents the reader with the central figure of Ultima, a benevolent symbol of family, home, and place, tying these concepts together as a sort of "earth mother." It is no accident that Antonio's first meeting with Ultima causes



him to have visions of the land around him, which he seems to see “for the first time” (11), and it is even less incidental when it is Ultima, not his mother and father, that Antonio runs to after he witnesses Tenorio’s murder of Narciso. For Antonio, regardless of his trauma, Ultima serves as a sort of psychic balm.

With Ultima serving as an embodiment of Antonio’s (and Kolodny’s) concept of a rural maternal ideal, the novel works to reconcile its various wayward characters with this border place that is half of the father and half of the mother. For all its complications, the larger region is still the natal spot for these characters, even when sublimated into the physical body of Ultima. When the old woman dies, she is buried near the house that holds the farmer, the cowboy, and their son. In being subsumed by the land on which their house is built, Ultima brings the disparate threads of the family together, if imperfectly, by nurturing and comforting them from within the earth.

In *We Eat This Gold*, I have focused on the idea of both the “natal spot” and the rural setting as a maternal presence, but in Sam’s world, both his return and his ability to be nurtured by that return are more complicated and not entirely successful. A theme I have addressed in much of my writing recurs here—the absent mother. Unlike Antonio, Sam has no Ultima, no mother figure to reconnect him to home. His mother abandoned the family after her perceived failure as nurturer and caretaker when Danny died. Without this influence, the relationships between Sam, Jesse, and Jake become brittle, crumbling by the time Sam graduates high school. When he returns home at the beginning of the novel, Sam has been separated from Kolodny’s rural maternal for his entire adult life, having fled to the city and failed at relationships with women. Once back in Pike County, he finds caretakers of a sort—Jesse, Jake, Guaman, and even Julie serve as guides at

different points—but none replace the maternal influence he believes he lost when his mother left. Guaman comes closest, perhaps, filling the mentor role that Jesse cannot or will not, but is himself not of this place. His disconnection amplifies Sam's. Jake wants to guide Sam back to religion, but is not ultimately successful, and while Julie is a mother, she is in many ways more traditionally masculine than Sam in their relationship, confronting her ex-husband more forcefully than Sam, chewing tobacco, and being more sexually aggressive than Sam.

If a maternal figure is to be found in *We Eat This Gold*, it is in many ways (*a la* Kolodny) Pike County itself. While Sam doesn't want to return, by the second chapter he finds comfort in the land. While Jesse works, Sam wanders around the backyard, on the border between Dad's cultivated yard and the untamed trees and scrub that meet it. Sam walks without shoes through the yard, "his feet [feeling] more at home on the grass than the beige carpet" (10). As he considers the necessary conversations about his return, he pushes them from his mind: "For the moment, though, he stood sock-footed and breathed the fresh air he hadn't realized he missed" (10). Briefly, Sam is comforted and nurtured.

As the novel progresses, however, the larger problems of the area intrude and complicate this maternity. The county is unhealthy, both economically and environmentally. Coal mines have been the financial lifeblood of the region for decades, but they are going away, and those remaining are no longer safe for the workers. While the Friendship Mine twice provides Sam with stable income, it also damages him. First personally, through the loss of his hand, and then on a larger scale, as it takes Julie, Jesse, and his coworkers from him. Here, the "earth mother" is ultimately not a comforting presence, but a distant one—both soothing and harmful without intention. Leonard

Lutwack, in his analysis of how place is used in literature, writes that the “Industrial Revolution made the romantic love affair with earth untenable” (11), and this issue is central in *We Eat This Gold*. The connection that would sustain and comfort Sam is broken, partially because people no longer work to preserve it. Despite a passing familiarity that comes from exploiting it, we no longer know the land, and it no longer knows us.

This unknowable quality came about partially through the oral defense of my preliminary examination. Asked to write about Robert Frost’s line that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in” (38), I explained all the ways in which I found this to be true in my readings. During the defense, my committee nudged me repeatedly to criticize this line, but I was so invested in the idea as a sort of axiom that it never occurred to me it might not always be correct. In reflecting on the defense, I became interested in the collapse of this comforting thought—that sometimes, especially when you most need to return home, you can’t. The later events of *We Eat This Gold* were shaped in part by this realization. Sam is eventually comforted by his return, moving from resistance to acceptance, especially through his relationship with Julie. Ultimately, however, he is not allowed the return he comes to desire, not because of his own actions, necessarily, but because the natal spot he desires no longer exists.

### **Emic and Etic in Rural Fiction**

A comparable meditation on returning home can be found in William Maxwell’s 1980 novella, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. Half memoir and half invented narrative, the book offers a thoughtful and difficult consideration of Hawthorne’s natal spot. In the

opening chapters, Maxwell candidly discusses the death of his mother (clearly conflated with “home” for him in the Kolodny sense) as well as the subsequent cool distance between him and his father. Maxwell equates these issues with the specifics of Lincoln, Illinois—his hometown and the setting of the novella. The early chapters are highlighted by his resistance to change after (and because of) his mother’s death, writing that as a child he “clung to the idea that if things remained exactly the way they were, if we were careful not to take a step in any direction from the place where we were now, we would somehow get back to the way it was before she died” (12). For Maxwell, every gesture, every movement his father took away from the moment of his mother’s death (building a new house, remarrying) wasn’t so much a betrayal as it was a violent separation between Maxwell and the past he wished to return to. “I had inadvertently walked through a door that I shouldn’t have gone through,” Maxwell writes, “and couldn’t get back to the place I hadn’t meant to leave” (9).

This desire to return to the past by somehow preserving it is a familiar theme in rural American literature, perhaps first articulated by Hawthorne in his “Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (from which I have taken the term “natal spot”). He writes that “the old town of Salem—my native place, though I have dwelt much away from it, both in boyhood and maturer years—possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affections the force of which I have never realized during my seasons of actual residence there” (10). In rural literature, this inability to fully escape the pull of one’s natal spot finds repeated resonance, especially for authors long removed from it.

For example, Maxwell tells us that he has not returned to Lincoln in decades, and yet the detail with which he describes it and the single-mindedness with which he

attempts to interpret its mysteries suggests that Hawthorne's "hold on affections" is as at least as much mental and spiritual as physical. Describing the street on which his father built their new house in the 1920s, Maxwell writes, "all but two of the existing houses were on the right-hand side of the street, facing a cow pasture that I think has not been built on to this day" (25). It seems doubtful that Maxwell could know with any certainty whether that cow pasture still exists when he has been away from Lincoln for decades, but because he *thinks* it is still vacant, we as readers are convinced by his desire as a self-described elderly man, long separated from Lincoln, to not just recollect it but to meticulously reconstruct it, down to vacant cow pastures. The purpose of this reconstruction, as it likely was for Hawthorne, is to somehow reconnect with his natal spot by attempting a vicarious literary return.

The relevant aspect of this return for the purposes of this analysis is the position of Maxwell not as character, but as author. Lincoln, Illinois (like Pike County) is a real place—the place where Maxwell grew up, and where the early events of the novel actually took place. In other words, Maxwell's origin as a native of the location is important. Simply put, the novel could not have been written without his "insider" sensibility. However, it's equally true that it could not have been written without an "outsider" sensibility. Maxwell was born in Lincoln and called it home, but once he moved to Chicago with his father during high school, he rarely returned, and eventually became one of the preeminent New York writers, editing *The New Yorker* for nearly forty years. Could *So Long, See You Tomorrow* have been written if Maxwell had stayed in Lincoln, or even the small-town Midwest generally? It seems doubtful. For this particular book to be written, he needed both the inside and outside perspectives.

Generally speaking, rural writers who write about their home regions tend to have departed those places, either temporarily or permanently. Because of a tendency toward fictionalizing locations, this is less obvious for some writers, but many of the authors previously mentioned in this introduction—Welty, Faulkner, Erdrich, etc.—chose to leave their homes before writing about them. They may not have left the broader region, or they may have returned to it, but each secured both the insider and outsider perspectives prior to writing their most recognizable works.

This balance between viewpoints is similar to the concept of emic and etic in anthropology and other social sciences. In simplified form, these terms represent the two methods by which cultures can be studied. In the emic approach, information is gathered within the culture and viewed within the existing cultural framework. In the etic approach, cultures are studied from the outside and viewed through an objective scientific lens. While these two approaches are sometimes considered to be in conflict, there are useful aspects of both, especially for the rural writer. Certainly, the detached, etic approach is likely to produce data with less cultural bias. On the other hand, it may also lose cultural “flavor” or character. (The anthropological approach to studying American Indian literatures in the 1960s, for example.) Emic studies, on the other hand, are more likely to preserve this character, but may fail to recognize cultural assumptions. For example, a culture that gets a good deal of economic benefit from a polluting industry may not be willing to view that industry objectively.

In rural literature, the emic and etic approaches are both useful. It is difficult to write convincingly about a specific rural culture without having experienced it, either as a native or as a long-term observer. Still, there are precious few examples of writers writing

about their hometowns or regions without having first left them. Why? Because in addition to familiarity, successfully writing about a place requires perspective and distance, like stepping back from Monet's *Water Lilies* in order to see them clearly. Maxwell could not have fully discovered Lincoln without leaving it, and I suspect the same is true of myself in relation to Pike County.

In formulating this hypothesis, I have considered what specific aspects of my novel may have taken shape due to an etic approach. The emic is easy enough to identify—those details that my readers enjoyed in my stories, and the ones I have employed in the novel, come from my experience as a native of the culture. The Trading Post, with its homecooked meals and aisles of hardware; the fire tower and its graffiti-laden makeout perch; the demo derby at the county fair—I have experienced versions of them and translated them to the page. The value of my etic approach is trickier to pin down. What do I gain only after being away? The first detail, minor but important, that comes to mind is the occasional discussion in the novel of Pike County dialect. As someone who did not lose that dialect until leaving home, I recognize that I needed to hear my native speech clearly as a dialect before I could describe it. I depicted Roger's speech in this machine shop this way:

He had a heavy accent, even for Pike County, but one Sam had missed while in Nashville. It would sound Southern to anyone from further north, but it didn't hold the same musical quality found in true Southern voices. Pike County speech wasn't accented so much as abbreviated. It left out any letter or sound not needed to get the point across. (24)

Before leaving Pike County, I would not have heard any of this. It was just the way I spoke. Only by learning to add the letter 'g' to the ends of words did I come to miss it.

Other, more thematic elements are also based on an etic approach. Growing up in Pike County, I never heard a word about environmental dangers related to coal mining. I heard plenty of complaints centered on the struggle between unions and companies, but coal mining was a community good because it allowed the community to exist. Only after leaving home did I discover important arguments against the mining of coal. When I sat down to write the novel, this outside viewpoint felt necessary, but also foreign to the characters. For them, as for families I grew up with, mining represents a paycheck that buys food and covers the mortgage. While I ultimately characterized this pro-coal viewpoint more explicitly, my etic knowledge is also in the novel, whether in Julie's offhand comments while riding in the mantrip, in the characterizations of the politician and the company man when they visit the mine, or in the presentation of Roger, caught between the benefit of the old mining life and the reality of the new one and the burdening knowledge that comes with it. The value of balancing emic and etic should be apparent to any writer seeking to portray such complicated issues, rural or otherwise, but for me, and for many of the authors I have discussed, it is a vital consideration. Rural authors need not choose between the two approaches, but a conscious understanding of what each viewpoint offers provides awareness of a variety of approaches, and how to balance the different experiential channels available.



### **Communicating Culture in Rural Fiction**

A final consideration relevant to both my novel and rural literature more generally is the idea of using rural writing to communicate cultural ideas and experiences that are not familiar to most readers. To some extent, all stories and novels communicate the specificities of a culture, whether it is the culture of a town, a city, a family, or a room full of people. Rural literature can make no claim to communicating culture more or less effectively. It often does, however, share information about groups of people who would otherwise remain unknown or ignored. In some cases, such as Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the information is meant to shock or provoke, to draw attention to the plight of a specific culture. In other cases, such as the works of Southern writers like Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, or Harper Lee, it draws attention to systemic concerns or difficulties within a culture. In superficial readings of rural literature, it can result in the "Hick Chic" misreadings mentioned earlier. In those instances, however, the novelty of rural material culture hides a deeper form of cultural communication. An excellent example of this can be found in Bobbie Ann Mason's 1985 novel, *In Country*.

While Mason lived for a time in New York City, she is originally from Kentucky (specifically, a dairy farm outside of the small town of Mayfield) and made her way back to her home state as a former writer-in-residence at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Combining this emic/etic experience, her writing repeatedly explores the specific region of western Kentucky where she was raised, and attempts to both come to terms with it as a native and to represent it honestly to her readers. Centered on a teenage girl named Samantha Hughes, *In Country* offers an analysis of the effects of the Vietnam

War on Sam's fictional home of Hopewell, as well as a detailed picture of daily life in that small town.

Mason's considerable descriptive powers are used in the novel to create Hopewell as a singular, unique town. Its geography, characters, and material culture all weave a fictional town that is recognizable to the attentive reader as being not only Kentuckian, but also evocative of a specific region of the Ohio Valley, not too far over the river from the Pike County I portray in *We Eat This Gold*. Put simply, Hopewell as characterized by Mason could not be relocated to a different place without being massively rewritten. Hopewell in a different state, or even on the opposite side of Kentucky, would not ring true. Whatever Mason might have to say on a national scale, she does it with a Kentucky accent.

This sort of characterization, so readily devoured by the Hick Chic crowd and its descendants, is difficult to accomplish despite its easy readability. Robert Rebein defines it as follows:

Regional in subject matter and realist in bent, this fiction was also somewhat minimalist in style, especially in its attention to the surface details of prose. Written by a new breed of writers, who were often from humble origins (and also very highly educated), it took seriously its representations of locale and work and sought to accurately portray a changing America as seen through the example of small, forgotten places.

(80)

I champion of this sort of regional characterization largely because it examines cultures that would otherwise be lost to globalization and modernization, and I have attempted to

approach its construction in my novel in much the same way Mason does, with the David Treuer-penned caveat that “It is crucial to make a distinction between reading books *as* culture and seeing books as capable of *suggesting* culture” (5). The danger of such rich, local depictions is that it is easy for a lazy or inattentive reader to find superficial amusement in something like Mamaw’s regionalism (““I could never get used to that,” Mamaw says. ‘Living in a different time zone’” [11]) or Uncle Emmet’s eccentricities (smoking pot, digging up the foundation of the house, wearing a dress) while missing complex subtexts. However, such readings cheapen Mason’s work not because of its inherent characteristics, but rather because it happens to line up with ephemeral tastes. Rebein’s analysis is more pragmatic, especially his insistence that the writing takes its goal of cultural characterization seriously. What is missed in an entertainment-based reading, but is central to the novel’s more profound success, is the meticulous effort Mason puts into the specifics mentioned earlier, not to create Thomas Kinkadee-style kitsch, but to explore the complicated issues of Sam’s family and her ambivalence toward the town in which she has been raised.

Sam’s mother lives in Lexington, Kentucky, which is at least four hours from Sam’s hometown, but while her mother wants her to move to Lexington and attend the University of Kentucky, Sam chooses instead to stay in Hopewell to take care of Uncle Emmet, a Vietnam veteran who may or may not be suffering from Agent Orange exposure. This decision is not made lightly, and as the novel progresses, she spends a good deal of time dreaming of an escape from Hopewell, not to Lexington but almost to anywhere else. However, Sam never really leaves Hopewell (except for a brief trip to Washington, D.C.), and the reasons behind this immobility are central to the novel’s

ideas regarding small towns in western Kentucky. In her concern for Emmet, and especially in her ongoing struggle to make sense of her father's death in Vietnam before she was born, Sam needs her place, her small town, to make sense of her life. As the novel progresses, she attempts a sort of reconstruction of her past through Emmet, her mother, and her father's letters and diary. It is similar to what Maxwell attempts in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, though on a smaller scale and ultimately unsuccessful, but even this failed attempt shows Sam that she needs Hopewell to understand herself, just as Mason needs to write of Kentucky to consider larger issues like the Vietnam War. This rural lens is necessary for Sam and Mason, but also for the reader, who cannot find this unique combination of character, place, and cultural analysis anywhere else.

The similar cultural analysis contained in *We Eat This Gold* only became clear during the revision process. While drafting, I had my major goals in the back of my mind—provide a sense of the places in and around Pike County, characterize the specific coal mining culture of the region, consider the repercussions of mine closures on the community, and examine how these places and changes help shape Sam, Jesse, Jake, Guaman, Julie, Roger, and the other characters. Only after looking at the first draft, though, did I begin understanding what I had to say about these concepts. Providing a “sense” of these places, for example, changed considerably in revision. When drafting, I focused a good deal on geographic detail, describing Sam's movements from place to place (driving to Evansville with Jake, or through Campbelltown to pick up Julie for their date). I did this to provide a sense of scale within the region, and also to help differentiate between locations. In revision, though, “sense of place” shifted from geography and observable detail to atmosphere and connection to character.

For instance, the first line of the novel has always been “The house looked different.” Originally, I simply wanted to hint at the change of occupant. In subsequent drafts, the idea of differences within the county, whether observed by Sam or not, started to feel important, and I found that I had made repeated reference to “differences” or things being, feeling, or seeming “different” throughout. Characterizing place became less about connecting dots on the map and more about conveying the difference between the current place and Sam’s hazy memories of what it may or may not have once been, and how the place itself has been involved with the construction of those memories. Guaman, Gideon, and Ball Hoot would not have lived in the place he remembers. He recalls Julie as a typical small-town prom date, not the complicated woman the dominant social structures have required her to become. He is forced to play the guitar differently because of his interactions with the changed, less professionally-safe mine. Perhaps most blatantly, the mine survivors are permanently changed as they make their way from the face to the entrance, moving slowly through both the new and old parts of the mine, literally through the past and present of the land itself.

Portraying the coal mining culture of the county and the repercussions of its slow disappearance offered perhaps the most difficult challenge, because my family never worked in coal mines and I knew much less about them than might be expected of someone who had grown up close to several. I was familiar with men (though no women) who worked underground, and I had heard stories, but most of what happened beneath the ground remained a mystery to me. Because of this, I needed firsthand experience and arranged to tour the last active underground coal mine in Pike County. During the tour, I learned more than I could hope to convey in a 300-page novel. The sheer scale of

underground mines staggered me—the drive to and from the face could take up nearly half of a typical miner’s shift. The darkness, the noise, the intricate and dangerous balance between men and equipment all became apparent in ways I had not expected. I also glimpsed miners in the act of mining, and they were notably different from the miners I had known outside of work. I was surprised by the sense of enjoyment they got from their jobs. In my brief time underground, I quickly came to see that mining was not for me, but these men laughed boisterously and told more stories than I could use in the novel. (One man matter-of-factly informed me that one of my characters must be named Big John, because “there’s a Big John in every mine.”)

Armed with this primary research and secondary work I compiled, I charted a path for characterizing the mines and their lasting effect on the region. Central to my presentation, though only mentioned directly a handful of times, is that miners are caught between two forces equally destructive to their livelihoods—de-unionization of mines and increased environmental oversight on the federal level. Interestingly, these two forces align with opposing political viewpoints, and it is no accident that the characters in the novel are largely apolitical. Coal miners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can’t find much support from either political party. (Coal *companies*, obviously, are a different story.) Because such tensions are found in any American coal mine, however, I also wanted to emphasize how *this* mine in *this* region would be different from others. I found the most useful vehicle for this was the incorporation of characters not native to the area—specifically Guaman and Gideon. Their perspectives on the gold mines of Peru and coal mines of West Virginia help provide contrasts to the Friendship Mine, which is not particularly

physically brutal when functioning smoothly. Without this, I suspect readers would assume Friendship to be a “typical” coal mine, if such a thing could exist.

Finally, I worked to show the effect of the coal mining culture on the characters, both historically and in the present moment. Jesse Hightower is not a bad man, but he is a difficult one. Some of this is temperament, but much of it is the conditioning that comes with being responsible for the safety of coal miners. He has never been fully able to shift gears between shooter/fireboss and husband/father. The death of his youngest son, cataclysmic for anyone, hits him harder still because of his constant state of responsibility for the safety of others. He believes he failed, and his disconnection from Sam and Jake grows from this belief, cultivated by his experience in the mines.

Granma, while largely separate from the mines throughout the novel, is perhaps the ideal representative of a culture so depended on dwindling coal resources. She is sweet and caring, but also fatalistic, recounting at Sam’s hospital bed the perils of relying on coal for a living, from Jesse to Granddad to Great-Great-Uncle Revis. Her resignation is important. When bad things happen, she handles them well because she expected them to happen. The trajectory of coal-mining communities can only head downward for her, and her acceptance of this reveals a good deal about the inhabitants of this place.

I am perhaps most satisfied about the intersection between character and culture as characterized in Roger Pirkle, the company man caught between the workers and the higher-ups at Black Stallion Mining. In earlier drafts, he was more of a villain, but I realized that a Pike County native, even if running the mine, would be sympathetic to the miners. He cannot allow this sympathy, though, to impact productivity or displease the company, because it might cost the miners their jobs completely. I believe that some of

Roger's moments—talking with Sam in the hospital or at the trading post, or walking a verbal tightrope with Jesse, the politician, and the company man—best personify the complicated role of coal mines in southern Indiana today.

## **Conclusion**

Writing *We Eat This Gold* has taught me much about the craft of creating a novel. Additionally, it has provided useful perspective on my continuing project of writing rural fiction, and through it communicating and examining my perspective of my home culture. My considerations of links between rural writing and the maternal have been valuable in exploring the relationship dynamic Sam has with Jesse, his absent mother, and Pike County itself, as well as positioning my work in relation to novels such as *Bless Me Ultima*, which are interested in the same dynamic, even when characterized differently. From an authorial point of view, I have also gained a good deal of perspective in considering the various positions rural writers such as William Maxwell can take in relation to the childhood homes about which they choose to write, and how both emic and etic perspectives are often necessary for successful exploration of those places. Finally, I have found value in considering how rural cultures can be represented (or at least considered) in fiction. Looking to writers such as Bobbie Ann Mason, as well as considering the pitfalls associated with Hick Chic and other similar readings, has helped me consider my own cultural representation in *We Eat This Gold*. While these three lenses have been useful, they are by no means the only three avenues for considering the risks and rewards of writing rural fiction, and I hope to continue exploring additional channels for analysis as part of my ongoing project.



While interest in rural fiction is subject to the same ebb and flow of tastes as any genre, its importance in our current culture is perhaps deceptively undervalued. As the rural experience becomes less familiar to our broader society, it is often left to novelists to preserve some small facet of the culture, if not in fact, then at least in spirit. The ways in which rural fiction continues to evolve as a vehicle for characterizing underrepresented or disappearing cultures suggests not only its abiding importance in our national literature, but also that, even as our society inches toward an urban-technological ideal that devalues the specificities of region and location, rural writers will continue to prove that the Argos, Lincolns, Hopewells, and Arthurs dotting the atlas still have important, irresistible stories to tell.

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We Eat This Gold

## Chapter One

The house looked different. Sam gazed at its dark form as he switched off the truck ignition and then checked the flip phone plugged into the cigarette lighter. Its service had been switched off a month ago, but it still showed the time. 3:08 a.m. The dashboard clock hadn't worked in years. A pale orange wash of light outlined Dad's house from behind. Probably a coal mine, either new or reopened. Mist clung to freshly plowed fields nearby, softening the glow into a backlight that silhouetted Sam's childhood home. He sat in the truck at the end of the gravel driveway, headlights off, tracing the structure against the light. The chimney had crumbled some more, and the aerial antenna still rose from the roof at a slight angle, though they'd gotten cable when Sam was a teenager. Hanging plants dotted either end of the house, though he'd never known Dad to have a green thumb. Maybe he had a girlfriend. Not likely.

The night felt humid for May. There would be plenty of mushrooms to hunt in the spoil banks tomorrow morning—something Sam hadn't done in ten years or more. Mushrooms didn't grow in downtown Nashville. Not the edible kind, anyway. He rolled down the window and sniffed the air, full of earth and fertilizer. No moon. Dad slept

light, or had in the years after Mom left, and Sam suspected that soon a light would snap on in the living room, followed by the front door swinging open, framing Dad in his underwear as he shouted “somebody out there?”. But the lights stayed off. Sam would have to wake him up. “Hi, Dad,” he’d say. “Been a while.” Granddad’s funeral. Five years at least.

Sam heaved the dented truck door open and lowered his foot onto the gravel. Large chunks, not the finer stuff they used in town. It took longer to grind into the soil, Dad said. “Sissy gravel,” he called the other kind. Sam eased the door closed, trying to avoid the metallic pop from where the two dented panels touched. They gave a groan instead. Again, he wondered if Dad would wake. Sam had passed a sign reading “Leaving Gibson County, Entering Pike County” a few miles back, but it hadn’t registered until now, his feet scraping the rocks with each step he took. Home. The last place he wanted to be.

Easing up the stairs and avoiding the worn and squeaky third one, he stood on the porch for a moment. With the glow of the mine fully behind the house, his eyesight grew sharper. The slatted porch swing still hung low on the left side, though it appeared to have been painted. More plants hung from screwhooks in the ceiling, though Sam didn’t recognize the blossoms. A flag jutted from a pole at each end of the porch. The one on his left was the same Stars and Stripes Dad always kept hanging, but Sam couldn’t make out the other one. Dark on both ends and lighter in the middle with something in the center. A new IU flag, perhaps. Dad never missed a game of Hoosiers basketball unless he had to work.

Sam pulled the screen open with a low screech and tried the door. Locked. The only lock Dad had ever needed before was the one on the gun cabinet in the coat closet just inside the door, but he'd been alone for a while now. Danny had been dead for, what, almost thirty years? Mom had disappeared shortly after, and Sam and Jake had tripped over each other to grow up and get out the door as lickety-split as they could. Some mistrust of the world was understandable. He reached up to the spider-webby porch light and unscrewed its bottom. It didn't move at first, but then began to turn with a rusty grind. As it came loose in his hand, the porch shook violently beneath his feet as the familiar tremor of a mine blast rattled his legs. The house shook with a sound like a truck full of furniture braking sharply. The one sound Dad could always sleep through.

Sam looked at the lamp base in his hand. An oxidized door key lay on it, mostly covered with dead bugs. He blew them aside and pinched the key between the calloused tips of his fingers. He rubbed them back and forth against the rusted key and stood for a moment in the dark.

He and Michelle had fought that afternoon, and she'd tried to keep his guitar as he slunk out the door. His only possession worth anything, she'd told him, and she could sell it to help pay the three half-months of rent he owed her.

"Why don't you sell the ring?" he asked her as he tightened his grip on the case handle.

"The guitar's worth ten times what you paid for this." She nodded toward her left hand and gave the case another violent tug.

She was right, almost to the dollar. She'd helped him make payments on the guitar when he'd needed an upgrade two years ago. An investment in their future, she'd

called it. The ring, though he'd never told her, had cost him two-forty-nine ninety-nine at the jewelry stand in the mall. Nothing else in the apartment was worth half that. Posters from Sam's local bar gigs hung on the walls, some framed and some not, along with album art signed by some of Nashville's hotter names from the last decade. The exposed bricks of the studio apartment were otherwise bare. They'd lived there for five years, engaged for two.

"Keep the ring," he said, "but I need the guitar." He gave it one last tug, knocking her off balance. She fell to the floor. He wanted to drop the guitar and see if she was okay, but instead he slipped out the front door. It creaked nearly closed behind him as he walked to the stairs.

"What for?" her voice echoed down the hallway behind him. "Firewood?"

An hour later he sat in a Waffle House, eating breakfast for dinner. Two hours after that, he spent the last of his cash on enough gas to get him to the only place he wouldn't have to pay rent. As the sun sank beneath the rolling hills west of Nashville, he crossed the Cumberland River and headed north toward Indiana.

Now, standing on Dad's porch in the middle of the night, the walls rattled from a second mine blast. He slid the key into the loose doorknob. It didn't fit at first, but he held the knob tight and wiggled the key. With a sandpapery sound, it slid home. The door opened into darkness as he eased the screen closed behind him. Inside, warm bread and spices hung on the air, not Dad's skunked beer and unwashed sheets. The whiff of coal dust, stale and oily, was still unmistakable. Stepping forward, Sam's feet tangled with a pair of unlaced boots. He caught himself with a hard hand against the wall, and the sulfurous smell grew stronger. Was Dad mining again? Why would he keep his boots

inside the door when he always kicked them off on the porch? Sam flipped on the lights, tired of sneaking.

“Dad?” he said, but the sound died on his lips. Nothing looked right. Bright red curtains covered the back window, not the yellowed blinds he remembered. An equally red couch sat beneath them with a dark wooden table in front of it. The island between the living room and kitchen had a bright, woven runner down its length, and a half-covered basket of bread sat on it. To his left hung three framed pictures he’d never seen before. Each appeared hand-drawn, showing strange buildings and oddly dressed figures with an unreadable language coming from their mouths in word balloons. Large phrases in the same language ran across the top of each drawing. Sam looked back at the entrance behind him and thought of the floating door from the beginning of the old *Twilight Zone* episodes he’d stayed up watching as a kid.

“Do not move.” The voice made Sam jump and spin back to the room. Behind the kitchen counter stood a short, brown man with dark hair and a mustache. Just above the surface of the island he held a pistol-grip shotgun leveled at Sam.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Sam sputtered as he raised his palms toward the man.

“I said, do not move.” A strong voice, but brittle. Sam froze, glancing around the room frantically for something familiar. Even the paint on the walls had changed.

“Guaman?” This voice, female, came from somewhere around the corner, probably from the bedroom down the hall. Both had heavy accents. Mexican?

“Stay quiet!” the man said. “Call 911!”

“Why?” the woman shouted.

“Why are you asking me this?” His eyes had grown round. “Just call!”



Moths fluttered against the back of Sam's head as they made their way through the holes in the screen door. "Who are you?" he asked.

"You don't need to know that," the man said, jostling the shotgun as he reapplied his grip.

"Okay, I'll go first," Sam said. "My name's Sam, and this is my house."

"It is not," the man said. "Pilar, did you call the *tombo*?" he shouted down the hallway.

"911 is not working!" Pilar's voice came back, slightly hysterical. At this, a child's cry erupted from the same direction.

"*Mierda*," the man whispered. He gripped the gun again, his finger dancing around the trigger guard.

"911's been spotty ever since they got it around here," Sam said. "Just try the sheriff's number inside the front page of the phone book." He nodded toward the slim yellow volume on the counter below the kitchen phone. A deputy could straighten this out. "Tell them you're on Muren Church Road in Arthur." The man looked at him for a long moment, the gun raising and lowering by fractions of an inch.

"Who are you?" the man said again, hitting the first word this time. The child continued to cry in a raspy, high-pitched tone as the woman's voice made hasty soothing sounds.

"I'm Sam," he repeated. "Sam Hightower. This is my dad's house."

The man blinked a few times, then let out a breath and lowered his gun. "Put away the phone, Pilar," he said. "This is Torrealta's boy."

## Chapter Two

“You couldn’t have called and told me?” Sam looked at Dad, sitting across the table. “Or sent a letter?”

“When have I ever written a letter?” Dad said, spitting tobacco juice into a Pepsi bottle.

The new kitchen was bright, with a large window over the sink looking out onto a backyard full of trees and a large corrugated steel outbuilding. The first rays of morning sun lit its mostly bare walls, but Sam couldn’t make out the color. The gray in Dad’s curly hair and beard shone almost silver whenever his head slid into one of the sunbeams.

“Besides,” Dad said, “they didn’t change my number just because I moved across the road.” Another juicy spit. A puck-shaped can of Skoal sat on the table between them, tiny in the spacious new kitchen.

“Fair enough.” Birdsong began to replace the cricket chirps outside.

“Your brother’ll be glad to see you,” Dad said, more to the room than to Sam. He tucked the can into the front pocket of his faded flannel shirt and stood up.

“Still teaching and preaching?”

“What else would he do?” Dad opened the door and walked into the garage, moving a fraction slower than when Sam had last seen him. Still lean, though, like water poured from a pitcher.

Dad wanted to know why Sam was there. Why he would show up in the middle of the night unannounced. But Dad didn’t ask questions. He waited for volunteered information. Silences between them had always felt like the moment in war movies when the bomb doesn’t go off right away. Sam often yammered to fill the void. Now he rose and walked to the open door. Dad was sitting on a stool, pulling on his blackened work boots. His eyes flicked toward Sam, then back to his laces.

“You put on a few more pounds,” Dad said, a faint emphasis on “more.” Sam had been skinny like Dad until after high school, but studio musicians didn’t get much of exercise and ate a lot of fast food.

“So what’s the deal with those people living in the old house?” Sam asked.

“G-Man?” Dad said. “Works out at the mine with me. Runs the safety monitor in the control room and checks the sensor line sometimes. Good guy, except when he comes over the radio and you can’t understand a damn word he says. Always takes overtime, though.” Since Sam was a boy, this had been one of the benchmarks Dad had set for manhood.

“His name’s G-Man,” Sam said doubtfully.

“No, but it’s something like that. Foreign-sounding.”

“Where’s he from?”

“Mexico, I guess,” Dad said after a particularly juicy spit.

“Are you back out at Number Five?” Sam asked. “I saw lights off to the east.”

The Number Five mine had been strip mining on and off for the better part of two decades, creeping slowly back through the woods that had grown up over older, long-closed mines. Most of the county rose and fell in sharp spoil banks, formed over a century of stop-and-start surface mining.

“Nope.” He popped a foot into an unlaced boot. “Number Seven opened up again. Two years ago.”

“Underground?”

“Yep.” Dad laced his boots tight, and then reached into a fridge in the corner of the garage, pulling out a battered plastic lunch bucket with a faded UMWA sticker on one end. After a moment’s thought, he grabbed a second can of Skoal. “You be here when I get off at three?”

“Probably.”

“Okay, then,” Dad said. “Got to get to work. Chips in the cabinet, beer in the fridge.” He slipped out the side door and closed it behind him. Sam stood awkwardly, as if he wanted to say more to the empty garage.

The sound of Dad’s Chevy starting up and pulling from the outbuilding echoed in the garage, and Sam smiled for a moment at the fact that Dad had a garage he didn’t park in. It had been a dream of his when Sam was a kid. Every time he’d pull into the old garage and bump the shop vac or scratch his fender chrome on the lawn mower, he’d cuss and jabber to his sons about how they’d have two garages someday. Sam wondered how he’d finally managed it.

Sam woke on the couch around noon. Local news played on the TV, full of faces he hadn't seen in years. The anchors hadn't changed. Nothing changed in southern Indiana. Except Dad's house. He pushed himself up off the rough sofa, feeling its crisscross pattern embedded on his face. Light shined through a large bay window onto the living room wall. The new house drank up sunlight. Not like the old one with its small windows and north-south orientation.

He walked from room to room, each of which swallowed the tiny furniture. Dad hadn't upgraded anything in the move. No decorations, except for a few cheap paintings and a gold-framed mirror Sam had known his whole life. One of the few reminders of the time before Mom left. There wasn't much color from room to room—eggshell walls and beige carpet. The color scheme, mixed with the faint smell of new paint, made Sam feel like he'd checked into a decent hotel. He'd probably find a Gideons Bible in the drawer of Dad's nightstand.

Trees dotted the backyard, as if Dad had left some and cleared the rest to make room for—what? Mowing? Walking? The whole area suggested a rough truce between grass and woods, until the woods took over fifty yards from the back door and sloped up into spoil banks. The grass looked patchy and rough, not yet filled in where Dad had ground the stumps of the less fortunate trees. Still, as Sam walked in his socks beneath the oaks, his feet felt more at home on the grass than the beige carpet. He walked toward the first spoil bank, breathing the warm afternoon air. The night's humidity lingered as he rolled the last day's events around in his head. He would have to explain himself, not just in this new house, but in other houses. Jake's and Granma's, at least. For the moment, though, he stood sock-footed and breathed the fresh air he hadn't realized he missed.

In Nashville, he'd be halfway through a session by now, or would have been a year ago. He'd done good work at the studio. Better than many of the vanilla guitarists he'd worked with toward the end. Talent had never been his problem. Between takes, other musicians would watch him run through licks, occasionally asking a question or two. Sam's problem, more and more, was style. His heart had never much been in country music. Oh, he played the hell out of old Johnny Cash and Gram Parsons albums, but he'd cut his teeth on the kind of rock nobody played anymore. After high school, he'd spent a semester at Oakland City College to refine his mostly self-taught technique. He planned to learn what he could from the second-rate professors and then head west, but money had been tight and Dad had fought him on it, so he picked Nashville as more attainable short-term goal. That had been fifteen years ago. His rock sensibilities had fit in with the grittier sound filling the country airwaves then, but things had grown more produced and processed, leaving less room every year for a sound he couldn't change.

His fingers still had calluses, but when he picked up his guitar lately, it took an hour of playing to numb the faint pain in his fingertips. He thought about bringing his guitar into the backyard and playing a bit, maybe running through some arpeggios, but the guitar felt safer in its case. Instead, he walked along the edge of the woods, glancing around for mushrooms. He doubted they'd grow here, exposed to the wind, but it occupied his mind for a while.

Dad pulled into the driveway a little after three, grinding the gravel under his truck tires with dull pops. Sam, sitting in a lawn chair, rose to meet him. No sense in putting things off. Dad slid the Chevy into park and hopped out onto the paved carport.

Another upgrade from the old house. He stretched and looked up at the clear sky, dangling his lunch bucket from one hand. His white belly peeked from under the flannel.

“Turned out warm today,” he said toward Sam.

“Yeah, it did,” Sam said. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure thing.” He slipped through the side garage door, boots and lunch bucket in tow. Sam followed. “What’s on your mind?” came his voice from inside.

“Aren’t you wondering why I’m here?” Sam asked, stepping through the door.

“You mean you didn’t come to see me?” Dad tucked his boots by the kitchen door.

“I did, but for a reason. A few reasons, really.”

“I’m all ears.” Dad dumped trash from his lunch bucket into a small garbage can by the fridge, and then faced Sam for the first time since he’d come home. Sam stared into the bright blue eyes, rimmed red and black with coal dust. The cool concrete of the garage floor chilled his feet.

“I left Michelle.” He thought of her, falling to the floor as he yanked the guitar away.

“Did I meet her?” Dad said.

“You know you didn’t.” He leaned against a table piled with empty boxes. “But I called and told you we were engaged.”

“You left a message.” Dad worked tobacco around in his bottom lip. “What happened?”

“Things got complicated, I guess.” The words felt like a mouthful of saltine crackers.

“Things do that,” Dad said. “But that’s not why you’re here.” He turned and picked at some dried food on his lunchbox. “You lived down there for a long time before you moved in with her.” The timbre of his voice rose a little. *Moved in with her*. Not the Pike County way. “You just come up for some sympathy?” He snapped the lunchbox shut and turned, looking through Sam as much as at him.

“Not likely.” Sam kicked at a loose washer on the floor, skittering it to the wall. The echo died before he spoke again. “I’m not playing at the studio anymore.”

Dad perked up. It had been his prophecy for years. *Music’s fun, but it’s not a living*. Sam had heard it since high school, when he played in the pep band instead of on the basketball team. *Is basketball a living?* he’d asked on a few occasions with no response.

“Sorry to hear that,” Dad said.

“No you’re not.”

“So what do you need?”

“To pay some bills.” Sam looked for another washer to kick, but Dad kept a clean garage. “Somewhere to stay while I save some money.”

“Well, you’re welcome here,” Dad said. “Got a guest room downstairs. Have to clear some hunting stuff out, but it’s yours if you need it.”

“Okay, so—”

“But if you’re sticking around, you’ll have to pull your own. Get some work.” He said it as if Sam were still sixteen and asking for gas money.



“That’s what I’m looking for,” he said. “I said I need money.” There it was, dropped on the cool concrete floor between them. The refrigerator compressor kicked on with a whirr.

“Lot of bills?” Dad asked.

“Not many, but I’m done in Nashville and I need enough cash to get set up somewhere else.”

“Where?”

Sam took a deep breath. “California.” Dad worked the Skoal around his mouth more urgently. “No arguing this time. I should have gone fifteen years ago.”

“Seems to me you had the same problem then,” Dad said, and then stepped to the door and spit the wad into the yard.

“Whatever. Any places you know of hiring?”

Dad wiped at his chin with the back of his hand, squinting at Sam. “Oh, I can help you out with that. You took auto shop in school, right?”

“For a semester, I think.”

“That’ll do,” Dad said. Then he turned and walked through the kitchen door.

#

Sam didn’t see much of Dad over the next few days. He’d picked up some overtime, and Sam spent long stretches out of the house. The weather stayed warm, and he decided that getting out into the countryside might wash the worst of Nashville off of him. He drove his pickup down all the backroads he could remember. Some had been paved, but plenty were still gravel. He fishtailed from place to place, stopping often at old iron bridges or railroad trestles to hear the muddy waters of the Patoka River cut their

way through the county. The gentle splashing mingled with birdsong and the occasional rustle of animals scurrying unseen in the brush. Even with the rust and graffiti on the bridges, he enjoyed the reduction in civilization.

Occasionally, he'd glance at the deactivated phone resting on the console of his truck as he drove. If he turned it back on, who would call? Michelle? The studio? He had the phone number of an L.A. producer stored on it—a guy who had visited Nashville a few years ago for a pop/country crossover album and heard Sam play some old Brian May licks between takes. He told Sam to look him up if he ever made it out to Van Nuys. It might be nothing, but when he was ready to head to California, it would be a place to start.

Though Sam and Dad hadn't spoken much, Dad had plenty to tell other people. Sam found scribbled notes on the kitchen table when he woke. *Granma wants you to stop by, or Jake heard you're home, go see him.* On his fourth day back, he decided he could manage seeing Granma, who was less likely to ask hard questions than his brother, so he stopped by on his way to the State Forest. By the time he got out of his truck, Granma stood behind her screen door in a billowing housedress.

“Well, come on in here,” she said, waving her hand. “What's took you so long?”

“Keeping busy.”

“I'm sure you are.” Sam appreciated the sincerity in her voice. “But you better at least take some time to eat.”

He hadn't called ahead, but a pot roast sat steaming and untouched on the stovetop. The rich aroma weakened his knees as Granma pulled out a chair for him.

As they talked, the tension of Dad's new house melted away. He ate more than he spoke, and she munched on crackers and mustard while she watched him devour the roast. Her hair had gone completely gray, flattened on one side from sleep. The rest shot out as if magnetized. The left hinge of her glasses was secured by scotch tape and her wrinkles had grown darker, but she had the same sharp light in her eyes. The same pale blue as Dad. Saltine crumbs piled up on the front of her housedress as she chatted.

In less than an hour, Sam had been brought up to speed on the happenings in and around Arthur. Attendance at church had been dropping slowly the last few years. Too many people dying off without youngsters to replace them. ("The kids don't even have Sunday school classes anymore. Not enough rumps to fill the seats.") No one blamed Jake's preaching, of course, but some had started sneaking off to the Methodist Church some Sundays. ("How you go from Baptist to Methodist, I just don't know.") The old Arthur store, a converted home since before Sam was born, had burned, leaving only a single brick wall with a faded Coca-Cola sign from before the second World War painted on it. Some houses stood unoccupied. ("Why can't somebody at least mow the yards, I wonder.") New, unknown families inhabited others.

"Like our house," Sam said. "Our old house."

"That's one of them," Granma said as she wadded the cracker sleeve and shuffled to the garbage can. Her feet never left the linoleum. "Seem like nice enough folks, I guess. Your dad gets along okay with the fella. Works with him, you know." She shuffled back to her seat and fell into it. "Mexican, I think."

"So I hear."

“Still, wish he’d stay out of those mines.” Granma swept the crumbs into a squarish pile on the table, and then looked at Sam a moment before she spoke.

“Are things okay, Sam? Jesse said you’ve had some troubles.” Dad had told her everything he knew, of course, and she would ask polite questions until satisfied.

“They will be,” he said. “I’ve got a plan. I’m just glad to be home for now, so stop your worrying.”

“Always something to worry about,” she said, sweeping the crumbs into her hand and dropping them on Sam’s empty plate.

Before he left, Granma told Sam to go see Jake, but he didn’t. It would happen eventually, but being around his older brother was hard for Sam. They’d fallen away from each other following the one-two punch of Danny’s death and Mom leaving, stumbling around each other in a house that suddenly felt both larger and smaller, unsure how to navigate the reduction from three brothers to two. They spoke a couple of times a year on the phone, but hadn’t seen each other since Granddad’s funeral.

Back at Dad’s, Sam mostly kept to himself while Dad worked in the garage on his truck or some other tinker project. Often, Sam sat on the front porch, looking out over a small patch of corn field and a few neighboring houses. Once or twice he saw G-Man or his wife working in the old yard. He wondered if they’d found the old frying pan that had once been first base, or any of the pocket change they’d thrown into the grass to try out the metal detector they’d gotten for Christmas one year. Once, Sam got the impression that the wife saw him, but only G-Man would occasionally wave. Sam returned the gesture, hoping it made up for the home invasion. Dad had built the house back from the road, too far away to speak.

After he'd been home the better part of a week, Sam brought his guitar case onto the porch to practice, but hadn't yet opened it when Dad stepped out the front door.

"How's living rent-free treating you?" Dad sat in a lawn chair opposite Sam.

"I'm happy to do whatever—"

"Don't get your panties in a twist," Dad said. "You've got plenty of time to make up for it." He put a Pepsi can to his mouth and spat. "What's G-Man up to over there?"

"Weeding, I think. Or planting something." The little mustachioed man had been on his knees at the base of the house for the better part of an hour, moving slowly east to west.

"Takes better care of the place than we ever did," Dad said. "You ready to start earning your keep?"

"Absolutely," Sam said. He'd been expecting this, but hadn't a clue what Dad would say next. Maybe a job at a garage in Winslow or Petersburg. Dad knew everybody. Work was work, as long as it got him to California.

"Good deal. Better find yourself a lunch bucket, because starting tomorrow, we ride to work together."

### Chapter Three

The short ride to the mine was dark and quiet. Dark because it was 5:30 in the morning, and quiet because Sam was half-asleep. A country song whispered from the worn speakers, and Sam wondered if Dad would like to know the drinking habits of the tune's bass player. As they turned from the highway onto the dirt access road, the glow of the unseen mine tinted the overcast sky a dull orange. Dad drove fast, and the uneven road tossed them both around the cab. Skoal cans clattered from one end of the dashboard to the other. Change rattled in the ashtray.

“Here we are,” Dad said as they rounded a stand of scrub trees. The darkness gave way to a haphazard collection of fluorescent lights, most glowing reddish in their old age. A few silhouetted buildings stood black and angular on the other side of a chain link fence. One monstrous tower of corrugated metal dwarfed the others, rising about twenty feet on the right side and around forty or fifty on the other, creating a Frankenstein boot shape. Halfway up on the tall side, a swollen line of rusty beams and sheet metal attached at a slight angle and stretched off as far as Sam could see. A string of lights dotted the top every ten feet or so, and something moved slowly forward inside. He recognized the

beltline because many more had once crossed above the county roads he'd driven as a teenager. Most now stood abandoned, but a few still ran coal with slow deliberation.

A sign lit by two of the fluorescents hung near the open gate. In large blue letters it read "Black Stallion Mining, Inc.," and under that, in smaller letters, "Friendship Mine," and smaller still, "Arthur, Ind." At the bottom, in a less impressive, no-nonsense script it read, "Authorized personnel only beyond this point." The sign looked brand-new, unlike everything else. They drove toward the best-lit building—a small squarish structure with a flat roof and glass double doors made of the same green corrugated metal. Sam didn't see a parking lot, but dark gravel covered the whole property. The scrub trees and some rusty fencing formed a perimeter.

Dad pulled up next to some other trucks and parked, spitting as he swung his door open and stepped out. Sam watched him reach into the bed of the truck for his boots and wondered if he would say anything else, or just leave his son to figure out how coal mines worked. Or maybe Sam had just been expected to learn by osmosis over the long years of his childhood.

"Come on," Dad said, walking toward the double-doors, above which a hand-painted sign read "Main Office."

"You want to tell me what I'm doing first, so I don't look clueless?" Sam said, following.

"Nothing I say's gonna change that," Dad said. "But if it helps, you're about to sit at a table and fill out paperwork until lunch."

Through the doors, an unimpressive counter cut into the room, like a doctor's office, separating them from most of the space except for a small opening to the right. A

middle-aged woman behind the counter with large glasses and a short, tight perm looked up.

“Morning, Jesse,” she said.

“Morning, Sue,” Dad replied, stepping behind the counter to pick up a file folder from a battered card table. “Here’s your paperwork, son. Have a seat and get started. Sue here’ll help you out if you get confused.”

Sue stood and moved to shake Sam’s hand as he moved around the counter.

“Handsome just like your dad,” she said as she gripped his palm with a damp hand. She smelled of department store perfume and wore a button-up blouse with blue jeans.

“Which one is this?” she asked Jesse.

“Samuel,” he said. “The younger one.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “The musician. That’s just so neat!”

“Yep,” Sam said. “Pretty neat.”

“Well, you just sit down there, Samuel, and holler if you need anything,” she said.

“Jesse, Big John’s waiting for you in the control room. Something about the methane detectors,” she said, turning back to her desk, which held more framed pictures than paperwork. In one, a small boy with two missing front teeth and head-to-toe camouflage held a dead deer by the antlers and smiled at the camera.

“Always something,” Dad said. “See you later.” He disappeared around the corner.

Sam sat and offered a smile to Sue, who grinned back in kilowatts. “Okay then,” he said, dropping his eyes to the file folder. He still had no idea what he was here to do, but that was part of the fun for Dad. Would he be going into the mine? He looked at his



boots, which he'd pulled that morning from a box in Dad's eerily clean attic, and wondered if they were sturdy enough for mine work. He'd bought them for hunting when he was a teenager, but they still fit. An old, brownish bloodstain spotted the left toe.

As he looked over the paperwork, the door opened and G-Man walked in. He carried himself differently than he had in the house last week, when his shotgun had been leveled at Sam. Then, he had looked open and powerful. As he walked by the counter, his shoulders hunched inward and he didn't look at Sue. She offered no "Morning!" to him. Just as he moved out of Sam's sight, he glanced over and made eye contact. His eyebrows furrowed and he disappeared.

Sam scratched out paperwork until lunchtime, reminding himself after every date and signature that it was his ticket to California. He'd have finished sooner if Sue hadn't shot him a random question every ten minutes or so. Sometimes she wanted to know about Nashville, or playing the guitar. Other times, she wanted to know about his high school years, thinking she might have crossed paths with him at a basketball game or band contest and forgotten. She also cross-referenced him against every relative within ten years of Sam's age, and of course, he'd known a few. He didn't mind the inquisition, because tax forms and liability waivers were dull reading. The sheer volume of paperwork needed to work at a mine amazed him. By the time he'd made it through, the lunch whistle blew. Sue left to get her nails done in Petersburg on her lunch break, leaving a "back at" clock on the counter set to noon. Sam stuffed the completed papers in the file folder and stood, stretching until his fingertips brushed the low drop ceiling.

He stepped slowly around the small room, examining the various safety certificates and informational posters. Near the counter hung a large frame with several

photos arranged in it. Sam leaned closer. Two black-and-whites of men standing at a distance on top of large mining machines of some sort, posed in the typical Midwestern way—arms crossed, no smile. Below those, an overhead shot of what Sam assumed to be the entire mine property. It reminded him of the illustrations he sometimes saw on the History Channel of ancient ruins. He could make out surrounding houses in the wide shot, including his old one. Dark, textured forest covered the spot where Dad's new house stood. The fourth picture, in color with a reddish tint, showed three miners standing on a stepladder underground, their poses more relaxed than the men in the older photos. Two of the miners smiled, and one appeared to have been caught unaware. They were all bearded and filthy, and each had a helmet light that shined toward the photographer, creating an aura above their heads, like old paintings of saints.

The final picture captured a lone man in coveralls and a helmet, leaning against a rock wall, his face nearly black from coal dust and his square jaw clean-shaven. One cheek held a blue-colored coal tattoo. Dad had them on his knees and elbows from scraping against fresh-cut coal over the years. The man didn't smile, but offered a pleasant glance at the camera. He wore a glove on one hand, while the other held what looked like a sandwich with dark smears on the bread. His eyes shone almost as bright as his headlamp.

"Scoping out the good old days?" a voice said behind Sam. He turned and saw a familiar face—square jaw, squarish eyeglasses, salt-and-pepper hair parted flat on one side, and a bluish stain on the left cheek. The pale blue eyes gave it away.

"Is that you?" Sam asked, pointing at the last picture.

“In fighting shape,” the man said with a smile. “Roger Pirkle,” he continued, extending his hand. One of his fingers ended in a dark blue nail. “You’re Sam Hightower, I’m guessing.”

“All my life.” Roger’s hand bit into Sam’s, covered by the sorts of calluses Sam only had on his left fingertips.

“Got your paperwork done?” Roger asked.

“Far as I can tell. I guess Sue’ll let me know if I don’t.”

“That she will,” Roger said with another smile. “Let’s walk a bit.” He started down the long corridor on the other side of the counter and Sam followed. “Jesse says you’ve got some experience with engines and such.”

“Some,” Sam said. “Helped rebuild a few in high school.”

“Dilly Farrell still teaching back then?” The old, bald teacher popped into Sam’s head for the first time in years.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Didn’t retire until after I graduated, I think.”

“Well, I’ll try not to hold that against you.” Roger chuckled. Apparently he had history with Dilly. They walked into a large room with concrete walls. Mining gear sat in half-stacked piles. “Here you go.” Roger pulled a hardhat off a shelf and handed it to Sam. The helmet had a slotted front for a headlamp, but Sam wasn’t given one. “That’s all you’ll need,” he said as Sam gazed at the other equipment. As they headed toward the rear door, Roger waved at a few people who passed them, offering a “heya” or “morning.”

Once out the door, Sam squinted in the midday sun. The day had turned warm. All around him stood the buildings that had been silhouetted earlier. In the daylight, they

looked about a hundred years old. A faint buzz filled the mine yard. It wasn't crowded, but there was constant, trickling movement. Men hurried from building to building, some carrying greasy bits of equipment. A small utility vehicle drove past, disappeared around a corner, and then drove by again with a second passenger. The sound of the beltline whined dully behind the other noises. A massive pile of coal stood in a rough pyramid under a feeder that dumped it in a steady stream. Sam took a closer look at the gravel under his feet—crushed rock mixed with black bits of coal. It coated the entire property, crunching under every footfall.

“This here's the machine shop,” Roger said as they approached another large, corrugated building, this one gunmetal gray. He had a heavy accent, even for Pike County, but one Sam had missed while in Nashville. It would sound Southern to anyone from further north, but it didn't hold the same musical quality found in true Southern voices. Pike County speech wasn't accented so much as abbreviated. It left out any letter or sound not needed to get the point across. “Machine shop” came out something like “msheeshop.” “This here's” became “thiseers.”

“Keep your hat on in here,” Roger said as they passed through a small doorway. The interior of the machine shop consisted of one large room, bathed in a yellowish-green light from overhead fluorescent bars. Various lengths of wire crowded much of the wall space. Great hunks of engines dangled from chains. Large beams supported the roof at regular intervals, painted an off-white that soaked up the yellow light. Dirty hydraulic tubing ran across the floor in loops on its way to a variety of industrial tools.

The largest object in the shop by far was a massive vehicle that hinted at orange paint beneath a thick rime of muck. A long rubberized belt ran the length of its top like a

treadmill, and the only sign that it should interact with people was a small cage mounted on one side containing a cramped seat, some buttons, and a control stick.

“That’s a loader,” Roger said over the ruckus. “It’ll move coal from the face to the belt all day long.” He sounded like he wanted to sell Sam a car. “See that narrow part in the middle? The whole damn thing bends there, because the cuts down there are only sixteen feet wide. Turns right in the middle. And it’s not the driver’s job to look out for anybody else.” Sam stared at the machine. “More fellas in mines gets killed by standing in the wrong place than anything else,” Roger finished, as if highlighting the loader’s features. Sam imagined one of these monstrosities barreling around a corner and over an unsuspecting miner. “This one runs on batteries,” he added, “so we’re going green.” He slapped Sam on the shoulder and spat a brown stream onto the concrete floor. Sam smiled back and tried not to stare at the coal stain on Roger’s cheek.

“Hey, Brick,” Roger shouted across the room. Even over the mechanical din, his voice echoed off the metal roof and walls. A large man in blue coveralls at the opposite end turned and looked toward them.

“Hey, Roger,” he shouted back. “What brings you out of the office?” He held some sort of alternator in his gloved hands, but he set it on a shelf as he walked toward them, wiping his gloves on the front of his coveralls. “It catch fire or something?”

Roger gestured toward Sam. “Brick, this is Sam Hightower. Jesse’s boy.”

Brick looked down from his six-plus feet at Sam. “My condolences,” he said. Sam smiled.

“Sam’s gonna be helping out around here,” Roger continued. “Jesse says he knows engines.” Obviously Dad’s words, not Sam’s, held value.

Brick cocked his head and looked Sam over. “You worked on heavy equipment?”

“Not like this,” Sam said. “Trucks, some. It’s all the same under the hood, right?”

He’d meant it as a joke, but Brick didn’t laugh.

“Okay, I’ll leave you boys to it,” Roger said, already heading toward the door.

“Papers don’t sign themselves.”

Sam looked at Brick and then around the room. Half a dozen other men worked at various stations, most glancing at Sam. At the far end of the room, near where Brick had been working, a man began welding. The light flashed across the room like lightning.

“Tell you what,” Brick said, reaching under a table. “Let’s start with some equipment I know you’ve used.” He pulled a dusty broom from under the tabletop and handed it to Sam. “Gotta keep things clean around here.” He wiped his gloves on his coveralls again and went back to work. Sam stood in the middle of the room, wondering where to start.

By the time three o’clock rolled around, Sam had swept and mopped the floor and organized a large collection of bolts and washers. No one said much to him, and the work was easy. Most importantly, he’d gotten twenty bucks an hour for both the bolt arrangement and the paperwork. A day’s work—his first in a while. When the whistle blew for quitting time, he was surprised at how quick the men in the shop stopped what they were doing, yet how slowly they made their way out of the room. Instead, they congregated around a couple of small tables and chatted about their weekend plans. Brick led one group, and a similarly bearded but skinnier man led the other. Sam stood picking at a splinter on the bolt shelf and listened. Several of the men had fishing plans, and a few were going mushroom hunting. One or two had trips to Evansville planned with their

wives to visit Home Depot or grab a bite at the Texas Roadhouse. None of them seemed to care what Sam was up to that weekend, so he slipped out the side door, happy to leave the odor of ozone and industrial lubricant behind.

Outside, the air had changed. It no longer held the dewy aromas of early morning. Now, even if it smelled fresher than the machine shop, traces of combustion hung heavy on it, mixing with the sweat and grime of Sam's hands and face. Under it all sat a thick odor, oily but not oil. The smell of Dad's work boots.

Tracing his route through the front office and missing both Sue and Roger through well-timed sideward glances, he headed toward Dad's truck. When he found himself standing on a bare patch of gravel with a small motor oil stain, he realized the old man had already left. It made him less angry than tired, knowing Dad was having a laugh at his expense. Mine hazing, perhaps. His back grew sweaty in the sun, and he felt the workers' eyes on him as they loaded into their trucks and drove away. He'd been left in the school parking lot more than once when he'd "dilly-dallied" after band practice as a teenager, having to catch rides home with his pals. But there were no buddies here. There hadn't been many then. He dropped Dad's spare lunch bucket and kicked it hard, bouncing it against the tire of a nearby truck.

"Tires are not cheap," a voice said. Sam turned and saw G-Man. He'd clearly been underground. His clothes were clean, but his face held coal dust in every crevice, and the tied-together boots he carried in one hand were caked with chunky black grime. "I know," he said. "I bought them."

"Sorry," Sam said. "I didn't mean to."

“I doubt that,” G-Man said, looking again at the tire and the lunchbox. A dirty plastic bag and a thermos lay on the ground next to it.

“To hit your tire, I mean,” Sam said. “I meant to kick the bucket.” The sentence hung in the air for a moment as he contemplated its stupidity.

“If you say so,” G-Man said, moving to his truck and dropping the boots and his own lunch bucket in the bed. Sam didn’t know what to say. “Your father left you.”

“Yeah.”

“I can give you a ride, since I almost shot you.”

Sam opened his mouth and then closed it. He hadn’t said anything to G-Man since leaving his home that first night back, but his waves from the porch were probably more interaction than most people offered.

“Come on,” G-Man said. “My wife is waiting. No guns in the truck. I promise.” He smiled at Sam, revealing a couple of gold front teeth Sam had somehow missed during their standoff. Dad wouldn’t be back here until tomorrow morning, regardless of his son’s whereabouts, so he climbed in the passenger side of G-Man’s truck.

The interior smelled of cigar smoke, and before they left the parking lot, G-Man pulled a half-smoked Swisher Sweet from his ashtray and re-lit it. “Pilar only lets me smoke in the truck,” he said as he snapped his teeth down on the plastic tip. The inside of the cab was clean, but “ratty,” as Granma would say. Scuffs covered the dashboard and the windshield had a few spiderweb chips, probably from the coal trucks that barreled down Pike County roads at all hours. A plastic yellow necklace hung from the rearview with a cross dangling at the end, and the glove box fell open against Sam’s knees when they hit rough bumps.



“So how long have you been in Indiana?” Sam asked.

“Not long,” he said, puffing on his cigar. “A year and some months.” He flicked the cigar carefully against the ashtray. Sam had never known anyone who actually used a vehicle ashtray for ashes.

“And what brought you up from Mexico?” Sam asked. “Work?”

G-Man laughed. “Nothing brought me up from Mexico,” he said between puffs. “I have never been to Mexico.” Another puff. “I hear the beaches are nice.”

“So why does everyone say you’re Mexican?”

“Because I am brown and they don’t ask,” G-Man said with a gold smile and a deep draw on the cigar. He wanted to smoke as much as he could between the mine and home, it seemed. “But it’s okay. You look Canadian to me.” He laughed at this as a burst of smoke rolled from his mouth. The half-lowered window pulled it from the cab of the speeding truck.

“Where you from, then?” Sam asked.

“I was born in Peru,” G-Man said, the “r” sounding like a “d.” “Have you heard of Huaraz?” Sam shook his head. He wasn’t even sure where Peru was, other than somewhere in South America. “Too bad,” G-Man said. “The Cordillera Blanca Mountains are beautiful. I lived there for many years. Some time in Utah after that, and now Indiana.” He said the word differently, softening the “d” sound and elongating the middle vowels.

“What was in Utah?”

“The same thing that you find in Peru and Indiana,” G-Man said. “Mines.”

They pulled onto the side road where the old and new houses sat facing each other. "I can walk from your place," Sam said.

"Okay." They pulled into the driveway and stopped short of the garage. Sam suspected there was no room for the truck, just as there hadn't been when Dad had lived there. G-Man stubbed out his remaining cigar in the ashtray and got out of the truck.

"Well, thanks for the ride, G-Man," Sam said as he stepped onto the gravel. A lawnmower purred somewhere down the road.

"Guaman," he said as he lifted his boots and lunch bucket from the bed of the truck. "You can call me Guaman."

## Chapter Four

Sam managed to be home for two weeks before he got a call from Jake. Or rather, a message on Dad's answering machine, to Dad. "Looks like Sam's taking his time getting in touch. Why don't you bring him to church on Sunday and we can have lunch afterwards. Granma'll make chicken." Sam argued that he had no intention of going anywhere without a direct invitation, but it was as pointless as confronting Dad over leaving him at the mine. The old man couldn't be drawn into an argument. For the first time in years, Sam would go to church.

Sunday morning dawned gray and cool with less traffic on the highway. Still, coal trucks rumbled by in jerky intervals as Sam got a shower and some coffee. As always, Dad was up and dressed before him.

"Got a Bible?" he asked Sam as he slurped coffee over a wad of Skoal.

"Must've left it in Tennessee."

"Suit yourself. The pew Bibles are shot, and your brother'll look to see if you're following along." Sam didn't ask where Dad's Bible was, because Dad couldn't care less if Jake judged him from the pulpit.

Sam topped off his coffee and walked to the driveway. He wanted a cigarette, though he was further from his last smoke than his last church service. The past few weeks in the machine shop had smothered him in the secondhand stuff, and he struggled to resist grabbing a pack of Winstons at the gas station. “No Smoking” signs covered the mine buildings, but most guys didn’t care. Even Roger wandered around with a cigarette dangling from his lips occasionally.

Sam had managed to stay out of Winslow since he’d been back, so the drive into town was his first chance to see what had changed. Not much, he realized before they were even across the Patoka River bridge that marked the town’s southern boundary. On the left, the old bait shop still stood boarded-up and gray, and on the right, the auto repair shop had soap on the bay door windows. Houses lined both sides of the highway, slowly spreading onto the first few potholed side streets. It wasn’t until the highway changed into Main Street that he saw differences. Where the old Lucky Dollar and the Masonic Lodge had once stood, a vacant gravel lot now sprawled, overgrown with weeds. The rest of the stores—Rexall Drugs, the Dime Store, Carter’s Feed and Seed—still stood, but from the looks of it, only the feed store remained open for business.

“What happened?” Sam asked.

“That’s right,” Dad said. “You haven’t been home since the fire. Couple years ago now. Started in the back of the Lucky Dollar. Bad wiring in the meat case, they said. Burned both buildings and the apartments on top. Fat Charley barely got down the stairs in time. Said he had to save his dining room chairs, even though he didn’t have a dining room table. Only things his folks left him, I guess.”

Sam remembered Charley, but not his last name. He'd always been fat, though not so fat he couldn't wander around the streets of Winslow looking for conversation at all hours. He talked mostly about his saintly mother, or his brother who moved up to Michigan and made Buicks. Sam had never seen him in anything but denim coveralls and a stained white T-shirt.

"They gonna rebuild?" Sam asked, wondering where Charley lived now.

"Nah. Not that many Masons around anymore, and there's a Wal-Mart in Jasper." He worked his tobacco. "Lots of good parking for parades now."

The First General Baptist Church of Winslow sat on one of the larger lots in town, with an open yard behind it, a parsonage to one side, and a dilapidated house on the other. Across the street, a cemetery that predated the church ran to a distant tree line. Most of Sam's family had been buried there—a great-grandmother he remembered faintly, along with a great-grandfather he'd never met and several of their children who had died before the age of ten. They'd laid Granddad to rest there the last time Sam had been home. And years before, Danny. The church was faced with brownish-green limestone and had a modest steeple ending in a tarnished bronze cross. The wood awning over the front door lacked a few slats, but the flowers and shrubs around the building seemed well tended. Mowing the yard had been Sam's first job. He'd hated pushing the mower through the yard in the fall when the hickory nuts fell to the ground. There were too many to gather, and the mower shot them against the side of the church like artillery shells. Sometimes they bounced back and hit Sam on his bare legs. He still had scars.

Dad left the truck unlocked in the parking lot with both windows down—a far cry from standard operating procedure in Nashville, even on Sunday mornings. They were

late, so there weren't many people still outside. Tom Blackburn, who taught Sam how to use the lawnmower when Dad had taken overtime one summer, waved from under an oak tree as he smoked. Sam waved back and smiled, wanting to bum one. Tom looked older, more wrinkled, but acted as if he'd last seen Sam yesterday instead of five years ago.

The doors opened into a simple foyer with two restroom doors and a small water fountain. A bulletin board hung crooked on one wall next to a coat rack, which was empty due to the mild weather. The bulletin board held a clot of sign-up sheets and mailings from denominational headquarters in Missouri. The piano banged out a tune as they walked—"Precious Lord, Take My Hand"—and Sam shivered at its tunelessness. It had always been out of tune, but Sam hadn't noticed as a child, loving each hammered chord as if played by a concert pianist instead of Eddie Uppencamp, who never learned to read music.

"Should I holler when we walk in, so you can make a grand entrance?" Dad whispered as he reached for the doorknob.

"They'll be as surprised to see you as me."

As they stepped into the sanctuary, everyone glanced up from their hymnals. Luanne Baker and her nearly blind husband. Mary Jean Quick with her eternally puckered face. Old Mr. Harris in the same tweed jacket he'd worn to church for decades. Tina Cockerham with her gaggle of kids (at least two more than the last time he'd seen her) and no husband in the pew next to her. All of them glanced up, smiled, kept singing. The room felt smaller than he remembered. The new upholstery on the pews matched the new hymnals in everyone's hands, a deep shade of crimson.

Jake sat in a cracked leather chair to the right of the pulpit, holding a soft, worn Bible against one knee and a hymnal in the other hand. His worn suit jacket hung open and a too-short tie drooped from his unbuttoned collar. He smiled and nodded at Sam, and then looked back to the hymnal as the congregation finished the final verse. *Hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall; take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.* Sam and Dad slipped into a back pew, nearly as far as they could get from the front corner where the whole family had sat when Granddad had been alive. Granma sat there now, along with two other women. Eddie smashed his fingers down on the last chord—A-flat major with a horribly mistuned C in it somewhere.

“Well, well, well,” Jake said, rising to greet the congregation while gripping his Bible white-knuckled. “The prodigal son returns.”

Somehow, Sam had known those would be Jake’s first words. So easy and expected. So Jake.

“Everybody turn around for a second and say hi to my little brother,” Jake continued.

Everybody did. Sam wilted a bit under the smiles, hellos, howdys, and waves. For a moment, he wished he’d stayed home on the couch watching the inevitable *NCIS* marathon. From near the front of the congregation, Sam heard a high voice shout, “Where, Daddy, where?” and then Jake’s reply, “Back there in the corner by your granddad.” An unkempt head of hair popped up like a whack-a-mole from the front pew and smiled. A face much like Jake’s, but the untamable hair gave it away. “You mean that’s my *uncle*?” the little boy asked, looking around at the whole congregation with wide eyes, eliciting laughter.

“That’s right, Danny,” Jake said as he settled behind the pulpit. “That’s my brother Sam, your uncle.”

“Cool,” said Danny. More laughter. Sam hadn’t seen the kid since he was in diapers and wanted to throttle him for the scene he was making. Dad gave him a quick elbow.

“Hi everybody,” Sam said. Someone coughed on the other side of the room. “Good to be home.”

As the spare congregation finished its giggling, Jake laid his Bible on the pulpit and gripped both sides of the stained wood. “Lucky for Sam, I just preached on the prodigal son last month.” His smile flashed. The better looking one, for sure.

From there, they followed the normal routine. Announcements, prayer requests, penny drill, more hymns. Through it all, Sam smiled at the occasional glance back, and returned the elbow to Dad once when he began to snore. Thirty minutes in, Jake stepped back to the pulpit. An expectant hush rolled across the room.

“Now how many of you put money in the offering plate today?” he asked. Sam crossed his arms at the invasiveness of the question. “Don’t raise your hands. I just want you to think about the money you dropped in there.” A few heads cocked, as if in real thought. “What’s gonna happen to that money, do you think?” No one spoke. “Most of you have seen the church ledger,” Jake continued. “Where’s your money go?”

“Missions,” a woman said from the other side of the room. Sam had forgotten how conversational Jake’s sermons were.

“Sure will, Betty,” Jake said.



“Upkeep on the church,” Tom Blackburn said, looking as if he’d like another smoke instead of a pop quiz. Sam knew these answers, and found Jake’s need for their recitation bothersome.

“Yessir,” Jake said. “Gotta keep the doors on their hinges.”

“Pay the bills,” came another voice.

“Your paycheck, preacher!” came another, followed by laughs.

“Fair enough, Martha,” Jake said. “I do like to get paid, and I’m glad you mentioned it.” He gripped the pulpit again and then opened his Bible. “We all like getting what’s owed to us. A lot more than we like working for it.” His face grew stern in a way that made Sam smile. Jacob Hightower, always expecting to be taken seriously. The older brother. “Well, today I want to talk about earning that paycheck. Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter twenty.”

Sam watched several people reach for Bibles in the racks on the back of each pew. Others opened their own. Dad didn’t do either. Sam thought about it, and then opened the one in front of him. The pages were yellowed and creased, and the red letters in the New Testament had faded to pink.

“Let’s take a look here,” Jake said, resting a pair of reading glasses on the tip of his nose. That was new. “Verses one through sixteen. ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market place, and said unto them, “Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you.” And they went their way. Again he went out about

the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" They say unto him, "Because no man hath hired us." He saith unto them, "Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive." So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, "Call the laborers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first." And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day." But he answered one of them, and said, "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."'''

Jake closed the Bible and took off his glasses, hooking one of the earpieces into the corner of his mouth while he looked out over the congregation. The sound of closing Bibles flittered and thumped quietly across the room. A few amens echoed.

"Well, that doesn't really fit with what we're used to, does it?" Jake said, leveling his eyes first at one side of the room and then the other. "Show up late to work, get paid for a full day. These days? Around here? Not likely." He laughed, and so did many in the congregation.

“Tom, you worked at Whirlpool for thirty years. Did they pay you a day’s wage if you showed up at three in the afternoon?”

“Nope,” Tom Blackburn said from a few rows in front of Sam. “But I wasn’t much for showing up late,” he added.

“I’m sure of that,” Jake said. “And what about you, Roger? What happens over at the mine if somebody comes in late? Do you just pat them on the back and give them their wages anyways?”

Sam looked across the room to see Roger Pirkle sitting in a pew with a woman, presumably his wife. He wore cleaner jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, but his hair still stuck out at crazy angles and the coal tattoo on his cheek was unmistakable. He hadn’t attended here when Sam was younger.

“We give them what’s on their time card,” Roger said.

“And if somebody walked in and took your time cards and ripped them up, you’d be pretty upset,” Jake asked.

“Yep,” Roger said, and Sam could see his jaw tense, the blue marks pulsing over the muscles below. Sam had only worked at the mine for a couple of weeks, but long enough to know that Roger, while a pleasant guy, had no tolerance for slacking.

“Sure you would, because that’s how a business works,” Jake said, careful not to prod too far. “Most of you know I teach social studies at the high school. If I showed up late without calling in, I’d have a long conversation with the principal, and probably the superintendent. If I did it a couple of days in a row, I’d be looking for a new job.” The congregation laughed, unable to imagine their preacher being so insolent.

“The bottom line is, this parable makes no economic sense. None whatsoever. That’s the point. And I’m here to tell you that you’d better be thankful God’s not running a business.” An easy turn, but Jake knew his audience. “There’s no time card,” Jake continued, “no drug testing, no supervisor, no insurance premiums, and no chance of getting fired.” More amens across the room. “And let me tell you this,” he said, pausing for effect, “the retirement package will blow you away.”

The whole room burst into real laughter and a few shouts of “Praise God!”. Sam could never talk like this. It’s why he’d picked up a guitar in the first place. Old Pastor Ennis had always wanted the kids to sing in church, and while Jake was happy to, it terrified Sam. The first songs he learned on the guitar had been to satisfy Pastor Ennis without having to open his mouth in front of people.

“But let’s not just start celebrating the fact that we can keep putting things off, because that’s not what Matthew’s saying here.” Jake looked back down at his Bible. “God may be the best boss you’ll ever have, but he’s no pushover. God’s ways are not our ways. Just ask David and Goliath. Or Jacob and Esau.”

Sam tensed. He hated the story of Jacob and Esau. The good brother and the foolish one. The unaware father. The disappointed mother. The God who changed the rules. Old Pastor Ennis had preached on it not long after Danny had died, and it had upset Sam so much that he hadn’t returned to church for weeks.

“But there’s still work to do,” Jake continued. “The householder in the parable ran a vineyard, right? So his grapes needed picking, and if he wanted to turn a profit, he had to pick a lot of grapes. Same’s true for us. I’ve got papers to grade right now, sitting at home in my briefcase, and I’m sure Roger’s got to get so many loads of coal out of the

mine tomorrow.” Seven. Sam heard the number often enough, even in the machine shop. “And Tom, back when he was at Whirlpool, needed to keep those washing machines hopping off that assembly line if he wanted to keep working.” Sam saw nods from Roger, Tom, and a few others. Tina Cockerham’s kids were poking at each other and fidgeting. “The difference is that my papers, Roger’s coal, Tom’s washing machines, and the householder’s grapes are just things. They’re important, but they’re not eternal. Coal’s been around a long time, but it don’t last forever. God’s mining souls.” Jake had them now. Sam leaned forward a bit. “And if you’re working for him, what happens when you wait until the last minute? What happens when you slack off because you’ve got better things to do? Those souls just sit there, locked away.”

A few heads shook in disapproval. Jake could be so earnest. God might be smiling, if He had any interest in a Sunday morning sermon in Winslow.

“Think about it this way,” Jake continued, releasing his grip on the podium and showing his palms to the crowd in a gesture Sam supposed meant he was changing the subject. “That thief they crucified next to Jesus. He said to Jesus, ‘remember me,’ and then Jesus told him that he’d be with Him in paradise that very day. We read that and think how wonderful Jesus is. But I’ll tell you right now that while he was happy to see another soul saved, this thief also broke Jesus’s heart, because he spent a whole lifetime thieving and getting up to who knows what mischief, when he could have worked for Jesus, harvesting those grapes, bringing more souls into Heaven. Saving people like me and you, who would otherwise be happy to stay on the fast track to Hell without ever looking left or right.”

The room echoed a few amens, but mostly sat silent. A few women fanned themselves with church bulletins despite the cool spring air outside.

“Jesus wants you to come work for him,” Jake said, his voice cracking the tiniest bit. “And he’d love for you to show up on time. Don’t get me wrong, he’s gonna pay you the same even if you show up late. God cares less about your hours than about your work ethic. Some say the landowner’s not being fair. That he’s mistreating the folks who worked all day. But that’s not the case. That landowner’s not worried about fairness. He’s worried about mercy. Giving folks a way to live. And that’s the man I want to work for. Come work for Jesus with me. Come today. Don’t wait until the last hour. Even if you’ve been late for everything else in your life, be on time for this. Won’t you join me?”

Here, Jake stepped to the side of the pulpit, and though Sam hadn’t been in the church for years, he knew what came next. No General Baptist service ever ended with a sermon.

“So, if you’d like to come work for Jesus—and maybe this is the first time you’ve ever even thought about taking the job, or maybe you’ve done the work but slacked off, gotten laid off, or figure you must be fired by now—no matter where you’re at with Jesus, you can come up to this altar and make things right. It’s hard to get work these days, but here’s work that’s always there for the taking, and in return, you get a living wage.” He gestured toward the piano. “Eddie, if you’d play us something soft. The altar’s open, won’t you come on up and take your place with Jesus?”

Sam had no desire to go to the altar, but he remembered having done so as a boy once or twice, and the heavy, sick heart he’d dragged up there, the uncontrollable release of tears. He looked around at the congregation as a few stood and made their way to the

front. Jake's sermon had been all over the place, but had done its job. Eddie began plinking out the chords of "Just As I Am," and Sam could hear Jake whisper "Yes, Jesus" and "Thank you, Lord" as the people knelt at the altar. No one was being saved—these people were longtime members—but even if the souls had already been mined, General Baptists loved their altar calls. The rest of the congregation sang as the sinners prayed. Sam stared at one of the stained glass windows. At its center, and pleasant-looking Jesus carried a lamb on his shoulders. God's ways are not our ways, Jake had said. It was the one thing Sam was sure he'd gotten right.

As the hymn ended, the altar cleared and Jake gestured for everyone to stand. Somehow, people always fit their distress into the allotted number of song verses. "We've got a sweet spirit in the house of the Lord this morning," Jake said, "and I hate to leave it, but I know we all have work to go do."

A breeze knocked a low oak branch against the stained-glass window, click-clicking like Morse code during Jake's closing prayer. Sam watched with an open eye as one of the Cockerham kids grabbed another one by the hair and yanked hard.

#

Sam tried not to say anything the first few times Danny spit pieces of his lunch back onto his plate. It seemed an odd habit, and one that Jake and Libby had no intention of noticing, let alone addressing. Danny sat to Sam's right at the kitchen table, Jake and Libby next, then Dad, and Granma on Sam's left. The table was smaller than the one Granma used to have, when meals after church had been more populated. A *plink* bounced around the kitchen as Danny spit part of a chicken bone onto his plate. This time, Granma and Dad glanced at each other.

“It’s so nice to finally get to see you, Sam,” Libby said as she moved potatoes around her plate.

“It’s good to be home,” Sam said. “And good to see this guy.” He laid his right hand on Danny’s head, and the boy stopped playing with his food. “How old are you now, Danny?” Sam asked as if playing a game, but he really couldn’t remember.

“I’m seven. I’ll be eight in January.” He sounded the month out carefully.

“You know, his birthday’s only three days later than Daniel’s,” Granma said between crunchy bites of chicken. A crispy thigh sat on Sam’s plate between mounds of potatoes and beans.

“Yep, Libby went into labor on Daniel’s birthday exactly, but the doctors called it false labor and sent her home. Sometimes I think the babies know more than the doctors,” Jake said, reaching over to pat Libby on an arm that looked thicker than the one in her high school cheerleading pictures.

“Oh, they were just doing their jobs, honey,” Libby said. “Besides, Danny’s his own boy, so God gave him his own birthday.”

Granma cleared her throat as Dad spoke. “So what’s this about a bomb scare out at the high school, Jake?” The front page of the *Dispatch* had mentioned it on Wednesday, and Dad had already read the whole paper. All ten minutes of it.

“Oh, just some kid trying to get out of a math test,” Jake said. Danny had started rocking on the back legs of his chair. “Four legs on the floor,” Jake said as he reached over and tipped the chair back down.

“Sorry,” Danny said.



“Why don’t you go on outside and play while the weather’s still nice,” Libby said. The talk after church had been of thunderstorms in the forecast. May in the Ohio Valley kept meteorologists guessing. Sam remembered driving through Petersburg with Granddad in 1990, the day after two tornados destroyed most of Main Street, including the Methodist Church and part of the courthouse.

“Do I have to?” Danny asked, slouching in his chair.

“Go on,” Dad said. “Fresh air never killed anybody.” Libby nodded at the sage wisdom. Danny poured out of the chair and headed for the back door. As it closed behind him, Dad said, “I swear, Sam, the only other kid I ever saw that hated to go outside so much was you.”

“Sam and his TV,” Jake said. “I don’t think you ever missed a cartoon after school. At least until you started locking yourself in the basement with that guitar.”

“It paid off,” Sam said.

“Playing guitar or locking yourself in the basement?” Dad said.

“Speaking of which,” Jake said, “How about playing a song at church for us next Sunday? I was gonna put you on the spot today, but I figured you wouldn’t be a fan of the beat-up old guitar we’ve got in the back of the choir box. Eddie picked it up at a yard sale.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, surprised at Jake’s restraint. He’d expected to be dragged onstage one way or another that morning. “I’d have to find something and practice.” A lie. He could open a hymnal and play any song on the spot.

“Well, think about it and let me know,” Jake said. “You could play ‘I Know Who Holds Tomorrow’.”

“Or ‘Until Then’,” Granma chimed in. “Granddad loved that one.”

“We’ll see,” Sam said. He hadn’t practiced much since starting in the machine shop, spending his evenings in the downstairs bedroom, gnawing at his calluses while watching Letterman and late-night reruns. He only touched the guitar when Dad was out, as if the man with no musical training might hear his smallest mistake.

“You know how much everybody loves to hear you play,” Libby said as she stood and went to the kitchen window to look out at Danny.

“I guess so,” Sam said. Not everyone loved to hear him play. If they did, he’d still be in Nashville, scheduled in the studio for the next act blowing through town to crank out an album between tours. “Additional Guitars” was how Sam most often showed up in liner notes, when he showed up at all. He thought of the producer’s number in his cell phone. It would be different in California. He expected his first paycheck this week. If taxes weren’t too bad, he figured he’d need five more.

After lunch, while Libby and Granma cleaned the kitchen, the three men went to the garage to work on Granma’s car, a twenty-year old Dodge Dynasty that had rust in the wheel wells and along the edge of the trunk. Dad had offered to buy her something newer several times, but she always said, “This gets me where I’m going just fine.”

Granddad’s little IU basketball still hung from the rearview mirror.

“Hand me the Allen wrenches,” Dad said, reaching a greasy arm out from under the hood. The hanging orange work light cast long shadows across the dusty garage wall.

“What could possibly take an Allen wrench under there?” Sam asked. Jake stood off to one side, leaning against the deep freeze and looking blankly at the engine. He’d

always been clueless under a hood, having preferred basketball to auto shop in high school.

“If you make me explain myself every damn time I need something, we’re gonna be here all day,” Dad’s voice echoed from under the hood. Sam handed him the small bundle of Allen wrenches. “But if you have to know,” he continued, his words rising and falling with his exertion, “this spark plug is stuck and I need to pry it loose.”

“Right tool for the right job, huh?”

“You’re the mechanic these days,” Dad shot back between grunts. “Why aren’t you down here doing this?”

“Because you won’t get out of the way long enough.”

“So how’s the job over at the mine?” Jake asked. “Granma said you’re fixing the big machines?”

“I don’t know how big they are,” Sam said. “Or how fixable they are. They make this Dodge look fine-tuned.”

“Not much reason for fancy stuff at a coal mine,” Dad said, still working the spark plug.

“Still, it’s a job,” Jake said.

“It is,” Sam said. “How are things at the school?”

“Oh, you know.” Jake enjoyed talking about himself because he thought everything interesting to him would be interesting to everyone else. “Budget cuts, insurance premiums going up, double extracurriculars for everybody.”

*Every summer off, every weekend off, holidays off,* Sam thought.

“They’ve got me coaching volleyball next fall,” Jake continued. “I haven’t played volleyball in ten years, let alone coached it.”

“Still, it’s a job,” Sam said, smiling.

“Fair enough.” Jake put his hand on Sam’s shoulder, but Sam didn’t reciprocate. The last time he’d embraced his brother had been at Danny’s funeral. Jake had held on longer than Sam. Truth was, none of them had known how to express themselves to each other since Mom had left. They argued or they joked. No in-between.

Jake dropped his hand from Sam’s shoulder and opened the deep freeze, looking inside as if expecting to find dinner. Dad grunted under the hood while Sam glanced around the garage at the odds and ends Granddad had collected over the years. A long fireman’s coat hung next to a cane fishing pole and a rusty vise on iron legs. An Orange Crush sign leaned faded and mouse-eaten against another wall, and a shelf sagged in one corner, overrun with mismatched hardware. They’d taken a pass at cleaning the place out the week after the funeral, but no one’s heart had been in it.

A sharp *pop* came from under the hood, followed by a “dammit.” Dad stood up, the knuckle of his left hand in his mouth. He held the spark plug and Allen wrenches in the other. “Just what I thought,” he said. “Dirty sparkplug. Anybody see the WD-40?”

#

By the time Sam got home, the clouds that had threatened all day finally opened up. The new house sat dark and quiet, the light through the windows green from the storm. Sam stood in the living room, staring out the window at the old house across the road. Guaman ran around the porch, trying to cover his wife’s tomato plants before the

wind picked up. The faint smell of new paint hung around Sam—still the first thing he noticed after being home for two weeks.

Sam watched Guaman long enough to see he didn't need help, and then descended to the basement. He felt the patterned walls on both sides, letting his fingers slide along the cool concrete. The sump pump kicked on, humming faintly before choking off again. In his room, he sat on the bed and listened to the rain tapping on the small ceiling-level window. The faint sunlight cast a greenish-yellow rectangle on the wall.

It felt good to see Jake and Libby again, but also exhausting. Sam had never mastered small talk. But that's how it worked in southern Indiana. Sam had grown used to studio life. People telling him exactly what they thought, erring on the side of over-criticism. Here, keeping the peace mattered more than any truth. He'd seen hints of it between Libby and Granma at the dinner table. Between Libby and Jake, too. And if they didn't see it between Sam and Dad, they were blind. Or just Midwestern. He thought of Michelle for the first time in days. What she might be doing. Where she might be. Working at the coffee shop to pay rent, most likely.

In the half-light, he reached for his guitar, purchased with money from those long coffee shop hours, along with the last advance Sam had managed to finagle out of the studio. Martin acoustic. Sunburst finish. Mahogany blocks. Adirondack spruce top. Fossilized ivory nuts. He'd watched both Jimmy Page and Johnny Cash play the same guitar during his time in Nashville. As his hand closed around the neck, the strings hummed at the light contact with the frets. He lifted it onto the bed and pulled it close to his belly, fitting the curve of the body against his right thigh. His right hand found the

pick he kept slotted through the low strings and gripped it tight between his thumb and forefinger in an “OK” gesture—the way he’d watched so many guitarists do it on MTV as a teenager. Terrible technique, but he could never quite break himself of it.

Both hands found their position to play the opening notes of “My Michelle.” He’d done it with every acoustic guitar he’d picked up since he’d learned to play the song twenty years ago, though he’d told Michelle he learned it for her shortly after they met. When he picked up an electric guitar, “Ain’t Talkin’ ‘Bout Love” did the trick, but he’d sold his Les Paul months ago and slipped the money under his own apartment door in a plain envelope. Michelle had used the anonymous windfall to pay some bills, and for a week or so, they’d been happy again. More than a few Nashville guys had given him funny looks when he played those rock songs, but soon enough the ones who knew Sam would just smile and say, “Don’t mind him, he got lost on his way to California and ended up here instead.” Sam never had the heart to tell them how right they were.

The notes echoed against the hard exterior walls. Dad had left them concrete because sheetrock walls meant higher taxes. They made for chilly nights, even with summer approaching, but it was worth it for the acoustics. The notes rolled over each other and spilled across the room, coming back just a hair flatter and giving the tune a carnival quality. When he got to the end of the intro, where the snare drum kicked the song into electric chaos, he stopped and let the notes sink into the thin carpet, replaced by the faint ringing he always carried in his ears. Too many years blasting the car stereo.

For the next half hour, he practiced as if he were going back into the studio, working his way through the major and minor pentatonics, and then playing around different voicings of the first-fourth-fifth structure that permeated so much popular

music, country or rock. He'd just moved on to arpeggios when he heard the door close upstairs. He'd forgotten Dad was here. His hands came down on the strings, and the music stopped with a lurch. Dad stepped into the bedroom and flipped the light switch, dousing room in the slow-building glow of an energy-efficient bulb. Sam squinted.

"Lucky you didn't kill yourself walking around down here in the dark," Dad said.

"It's not like you laid landmines."

"So you think."

"Jake and Libby head home?"

"Yep, and Danny too."

Sam laid the guitar on the bed and reached for his alarm clock. It was still early, but Dad would bust his chops if he forgot to set it.

"You didn't seem to know what to make of him," Dad said, sliding the closet door back and forth a few times as if anticipating something soon to be wrong with it.

"I know," Sam said. "Just weird. He even looks like our Danny."

"That a bad thing?"

"No. Just something to get used to." The last time Sam had seen Jake's Danny, he'd still been a baby. Babies mostly just looked like other babies.

"It is." Dad turned and walked out before Sam could mention the practical difficulty of keeping two different Dannys straight. Jake and Libby did it by turning the old Danny, Sam and Jake's little brother, into Daniel. That wasn't right, though. He'd never been Daniel to anyone except Mom. But they were both absent now, Danny dead and Mom long gone. Maybe changing Danny's name was better than pretending he didn't exist, like they did with Mom. Sam rolled on his side and placed the rough tips of his

fingers absentmindedly on the guitar strings. He raked them over each string's harmonic points and listened to the tinkling sounds echo between the concrete walls.



## Chapter Five

Long before the beep of the alarm clock, Sam awoke to more rain and terrible chills. No light came through the high window, and he shivered as if he were seizing. Even pulling the thin blankets tighter to his chin sent him into spasms. The thrum of rain rose and fell. He tried not to move, but as he lay awake, a dull ache grew in his lower back and shoulders. The flu. No doubt passed on by somebody at church who thought it was a duty to show up every Sunday, sick or not. He hadn't been anywhere else. He lay in the dark, not sure whether his eyes were open.

Sometime later, he heard Dad padding around upstairs and considered the best way to say he was staying home sick. There wasn't one. He'd only had the job a few weeks, and Dad never took sick days. Ever. Neither did Jake, as far as he knew. When the alarm finally went off, Sam jerked, sending another convulsion of shivers through his limbs. The base of his skull ached. He grabbed the small clock and wound its cord around his wrist until he felt it give and the buzzing stopped, then he lay in bed for five more minutes trying to warm up.

By the time he'd dressed and headed upstairs, he felt more in control of his shakes, but the headache had worsened. A booming thunderclap made him reach for the

banister to steady himself. When he finally made it to ground level, Dad sat at the kitchen table with his coffee.

“Moving slow this morning,” Dad said as Sam inched toward the coffee pot.

“I’ve felt better,” Sam said. He reached for the coffee pot, but took a moment to steady his hand.

“Sick or something?”

“I guess.”

“Want to stay home?” The question dangled like a hooked nightcrawler.

When Sam was young, eleven or twelve, Jake and Dad would rise before the sun to go deer hunting. Dad would come to Sam’s bedroom door a second time after Sam had fallen back asleep. “You don’t have to come,” he’d say. Or, “If you’d rather get some rest, that’s fine.” But behind these suggestions, Sam always felt scrutiny. Judgment. So he’d rise, groggy, and go with them, though Jake liked both hunting and venison more than Sam.

“Nah,” Sam said now, stifling a shiver. “I’ll make it.”

The five-minute drive to the mine took ten this morning, with sheets of rain coating the windshield like frosted glass. The wipers heaved back and forth as the truck crept along. Once or twice, they veered toward the ditch, and Sam would stiffen, only to shiver as the chills took him again.

“Stop shaking the damn truck,” Dad said once. “Hard enough to stay on the road.”

In the main office, Sam’s boots held water from the puddled parking lot. Rain had soaked through the coat Dad had lent him, too, bringing a painful cold with it. His nose may have been running, but it could have been water. Dad turned into Roger’s office

almost immediately; Sam continued toward the door that led to the machine shop. He didn't make it a dozen steps before a sneeze, and the spasms it generated, nearly brought him to his knees. He leaned against the wall, hoping no one saw him. The main hallway stood empty, mostly because Dad always liked getting to work twenty minutes early to drink a second cup of coffee before the crew meeting. Dad and Roger's voices echoed down the hall, louder than usual.

"I'm not arguing over the coal, Roger," Dad's voice boomed. "Seven cuts. Fine. There'll be a hell of a lot less if you don't give me time for a walkthrough. It's been pissing and pouring all night and part of yesterday. You know what it's gonna be like down there?" Sam had spent his teenage years avoiding that voice, so full of anger and infallibility.

"Course I know," came Roger's voice. "Check all you want. Just let the crew in while you do. No way we get seven cuts, or even six, they sit up here on their asses for two hours."

Sam squatted, keeping his back against the wall. Sue's voice drifted more faintly down the hallway, but the two closer voices drowned her out. He stifled another shiver, trying to hear.

"—as long as I'm fireboss," Dad said. "You're not careful, you'll bust through to the old Trident mines, and then we're fucked." A beat of silence, followed by Sue's faint, snorty laughter.

"Yeah, you're fireboss, Jesse. And I'm the manager," Roger replied. "We both got jobs to do. Yours started five minutes ago."

From the corner of his eye, Sam saw a quick movement down the hall and heard a crack that drowned out the thunder. Dad had slammed Roger's office door so hard the wall shook against Sam.

"Stupid Goddamn non-union mines," Dad muttered as he walked toward Sam, who stood as fast as he could. Dad stopped and looked at him as he regained his balance. "Dammit, son, are you sick or not?"

"I'm fine," Sam said. Then, too quickly, "What was that all about?"

"Get to work or go home." He walked around the corner as Sam sunk down again.

By the time Sam reached the shop, it already hummed with activity. One of the mantrips teetered up on the lift and two men were elbow deep in its underbelly. Every day the mantrips drove through assorted crud as they shuttled the miners back and forth from the coal face, and it played hell on their underparts, to the steady consternation of the machine shop crew. Sam hadn't yet been inside the mine to know the particulars, but both man and machine came back caked in the same gray dust and black mud.

"What's the plan today?" Sam asked Brick, who rolled a tire across his path. Watching it spin made him dizzy, and he put his hand on the counter for balance.

"Well, nobody's under yet, so we're trying to get caught up on some maintenance," Brick said, stopping and kneeling to look at the tire, or rather, the wheel it surrounded. "Like this right here. How am I supposed to keep these tires inflated with the rims bent to hell?" Sam looked more closely. In a couple of places the edge of the wheel was rilled like a piecrust. "The ceilings are low down there, but the cuts are wider than my driveway."

"Want me to fix this one?"

“For starters. Then the other three. There’s an anvil over there by the acetylene tank. Drag it far enough away so you don’t blow yourself up, then grab a ball-peen and get to work.”

“Easy enough.”

“Sure it is.” Brick grinned. “So you should be done with that in time to cut some sheet metal and patch a couple of rust holes in the bed of that mantrip. Don’t need fellas slicing their arms and legs open.” Brick leaned the tire against the wall. “You know how to use an acetylene torch?”

“More or less.”

“Well, shoot for more,” Brick said and walked away, bellowing, “Did you find that grease gun?” toward the men under the mantrip.

After dragging the anvil to an unused corner of the shop and prying the rubber off the first wheel, Sam thought he might pass out. He’d worked for twenty minutes, but it felt like half the day had gone by. He needed to sit down, so he slipped out of the shop, trying to keep one hand on or near a wall. The more he moved, the more he wanted to puke, but as he walked through what the miners called the “mudroom,” a small area where they donned and removed their gear, he saw the room was less empty than usual. Several miners, most of whom he’d never met, were sitting half-gearred on the wooden benches. Sam nodded and headed to the restroom. Dad might have gotten time to check the mine, or else the rain had just slowed the morning’s progress.

The main restroom at Friendship Mine doubled as a shower area, always reminding Sam of high school gym class. The smell of bleach and urinal cakes nearly overpowered him, but Sam preferred it to the guest restrooms in the front office because

here he avoided conversations with Sue about the weather or the church chili supper. The falling rain on the high metal roof echoed through the stalls and showers and into Sam's throbbing head. Safety posters and diagrams covered most of the wall space, though a few hastily torn pages of naked women graced the less conspicuous corners. Sam sat in one of the stalls, trying to keep his coffee down and his body heat up.

Before he thought Brick would miss him, he headed back to the shop. The mudroom had filled up, so he walked quietly along the back wall. The crew sat on the benches, listening to Dad.

“—a lot of groundwater today,” he said. “Probably won't be an issue down deep, but watch out for saturation.”

Sam glanced around the room. Most of the miners looked like he expected, though not familiar. It surprised him to see two black men, both of whom stared at the floor between their feet as Dad spoke. One appeared to be dozing. Guaman sat on their left, and he gave Sam a quick nod. Sam didn't want to draw attention or move his aching head, so he hoped brief eye contact was enough in return. On the other side of the room, a woman fiddled with her helmet light. Sam hadn't realized women worked in the mine, other than Sue, especially underground.

“—don't need any heroics from the bolters today,” Dad continued. At this, the two black men looked up and smiled.

Sam opened the door to head back to the shop when the woman looked up from her lamp. Frosted blonde hair, greenish eyes, a few deep wrinkles and a darkish complexion. He was through the door back in the rain before the features lined up for him. Julie Granderson. Not a high school flame, exactly, but at least a cinder. They'd

gone to the junior prom together. His junior prom; she'd been a freshman. Lots of fooling around at the fire tower after. But Julie had been pale, even delicate. Had her eyes been green or blue? Did she have a sister?

“Hey dipshit, you taking a shower or what?” Brick stood in the machine shop doorway. “I need those tires done before lunch!” Sam ran toward him, shivering as rain trickled down his back and into his boots.

#

By lunchtime, Sam had finished straightening three of the rims as best he could. He'd used gloves at first, but hammering such a fine edge was so difficult that he'd tossed them after the first wheel. His fingers had turned brownish-red from rust. He didn't understand how a mine could run with such third-rate equipment. The model number of the mantrips, which he'd had to look up for a replacement lamp last week, only went to 1989. He had no idea whether they'd been in use or mothballed since then. For all he knew, they'd been in the machine shop for the twelve years the mine had been closed.

Sam rested his elbows on the break room table and tried to eat his peanut butter sandwich without getting rust on the bread. Guaman walked in with his lunch bucket and sat down.

“How's it going?” Sam offered, not sure if he'd hear Guaman's response. His head continued to thrum, and now his sinuses had clogged, giving noises a distance made worse by the ringing in his ears.

“All right,” Guaman replied, pulling something out of his lunchbox that smelled much better than Sam's peanut butter. Sometimes Guaman ate in the break room, and

sometimes he ate in the mine. His job, whatever it was, moved him between the surface and underground more often than most. “You look bad.”

Sam smiled. “I promise you I feel worse,” he said, trying to speak through a bite of sandwich.

“The flu is going around,” Guaman said. “Pilar says that if I bring it home to the baby, she will skin me alive.” He bit into something yellow that looked like a tamale.

“I wouldn’t get too close to me, then,” Sam said. “I don’t want to be responsible for the police getting called again.” Guaman grinned, showing most of his teeth, gold or otherwise. Sam chewed. “So what was all that this morning in the mudroom? Safety stuff?”

“Safety stuff. That’s a good way to say it.” Guaman rifled through his lunch box for something.

“Is there another way to say it?”

“There’s always another way to say it. Mines are not safe places,” he said, sprinkling sauce on the tamale from a tiny bottle. “Your father can tell you more than I can.”

“Fat chance,” Sam said. Guaman smiled blankly, and Sam realized he didn’t know the phrase. “Not likely.”

“Oh, I see,” Guaman said, peeling the husk from another tamale. “Fat chance. I like that. Pilar will ask me if I’ve done the laundry. ‘Fat chance,’ I will say.”

“Let me know how that works out.” They ate in silence for a while before Sam spoke again. “There’s nothing wrong down there, is there?” He thought of the two black



men sitting with their heads down that morning, and of the greenish eyes he thought he'd seen below the frosted hair.

“Everything is always wrong in a mine,” Guaman said. “I have been in enough to know that. But nothing's ever wrong enough to keep men out. Until something is.” Sam wrinkled his brow. “I have worked in many mines. Gold in the Pierina for Empresa, uranium in Utah for I don't remember the name, and coal in a few places. I have had three union cards, but none saved men under bad top. Here, at least, there are no guns.” He stopped and took another bite. “Except for the ones I point at you, Torrealta!” He laughed at this until he almost choked on his food. Sam's question went unanswered as Guaman got up to throw his trash away.

“One more thing,” Sam said, still sitting. “The girl that works in the mine. You know her?”

“Sort of.”

“Is her name Julie?”

“It is,” he said. “You know things, Torrealta. We must keep you around.” He laughed again and left Sam sitting in the dank, tamale-smelling break room with a splitting headache and a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich drooping in his hand.

#

Sam had just started cutting sheet metal to patch the mantrip holes when Brick rushed to the shop door, walkie in-hand. Sam stayed and kept cutting, trying to use the smaller pieces first to spare the few large sheets they had in stock. No reason for more scrap than necessary. It was easy work, and he fought off the chills by running guitar licks in his head and imagining the weather in southern California. A few more men

disappeared as Sam pressed the hydraulic pedal on the cutting machine, trimming another edge to match up with the lines he'd drawn on the metal with a Sharpie. The cutter, roughly the size and shape of an upright piano, worked better than most tools in the shop, though someone had recently tinkered with it and forgotten to reattach the top access panel. Dad should give a safety talk to these boneheads. As Sam cut, he could see down into the machine case, where hydraulic shadows flexed in time with his foot on the pedal. Still, the blade dropped when it needed to.

Before he'd finished the first plate, a siren wailed through the shop door, which stood open to the still-pouring rain. Everyone else in the room had disappeared, so he dropped the sheet with a clatter and stepped outside. An ambulance had pulled onto the property between the main building and the end of the beltline, where rainwater splashed groundward over the coal pyramid in black spurts. Brick and the other shop guys stood together with Roger, Sue, and a few people Sam didn't know. The red and blue lights colored the heavy raindrops, filling the air with alternating hues. Already cold in the rain, he walked toward the small crowd.

"What happened?" he whispered to Brick as he eyed Roger, who stroked the stubble just below the coal tattoo on his cheekbone. He looked sicker than Sam.

"Somebody's coming up. Hurt pretty bad," Brick said. Lightning flashed in the direction of Winslow as one of the EMTs came over to speak with Roger, but the two men stepped away before Sam could hear anything. Surely Dad would know better than to get hurt down there.

"My dad, he's not—" Sam started. Brick looked at him with a lopsided grin.

“Not unless he dragged himself to the radio with everybody watching.” Sam looked at him, still confused. “Jesse’s the one who called in. Said he had a bad one coming up and to call an ambulance.”

Sam started to exhale, but it hitched into a cough. He stepped away to try and catch his breath. The rain poured over him, soaking everything he wore. It could be Guaman. Or Julie. Any of the men this morning listening to Dad’s safety pitch. Sam coughed again, bending over and putting his hands on his knees. Thunder rumbled and the voices rose. He thought he might pass out, but instead looked up just as two long headlight beams flickered around the outcropping of rock that hid the mine entrance from view.

Sam forced himself upright as the mantrip tore around the corner, past a sign that read “The Best Safety Device Is A Careful Employee!” and toward the waiting ambulance. The gathered workers moved toward it, careful to stay out of the way. Dad drove, hitting the brakes just before the ambulance, skidding the last twenty feet or so through the slurry that coated the yard. Everything froze as the mantrip ground to a halt. The lights on the ambulance seemed to spin more slowly. Sam took a breath, trying not to cough. The workers stood silhouetted against the red and blue flashes, growing less vivid between the pulses of color. No one moved. Rain pooled in the crevices of Sam’s ears.

Then the mantrip stopped and Dad leapt over the seat into its bed and a man screamed, high-pitched and nonstop. Several men gasped over the noise of rain, and a few turned away. Sam’s feet moved him closer. As the EMTs shouted and men stumbled in every direction trying to help or get out of the way, Sam slipped between Brick and a man he didn’t know. Dad had stopped the mantrip with its back end kiddy-cornered to the

door of the ambulance. A stretcher stood between them, its wheels buried in the sludge. Someone dropped the tailgate of the mantrip and Sam saw a man leaning against one of the seats with Dad's arm under him, trying to pull him toward the edge. Dad's feet slipped in the sopping bed and the man's helmet beam swung through the rain like a searchlight.

“Goddammit, somebody get up here and help me!” Dad shouted through the downpour. Roger vaulted up in to the bed of the mantrip, spryer than Sam would have guessed. Together, they lifted the man between them. Sam saw the leg, or what was left of it. The man's left thigh extended from his waist normally, but at the knee it took a grisly turn away from the other one, angled forward and to the left as if the bottom half were kicking forward. Except that the lower half of the leg wasn't really there. Most of the pant leg had been torn away, exposing a ghastly wad of shredded muscle, like the calf had been turned inside out. Dark blood pulsed lazily in a few places, washed almost instantly away by the rain. Sam could see bone, but had no sense of whether it was broken. Near the ankle, the leg seemed to find itself again, and the foot was intact, though gray, like a low-cut gym sock. As Dad and Roger leaned forward to step down, a long rope of muscle swung away from the upper calf and slapped wetly on the front of the foot. Sam turned to the side of the ambulance and vomited.

He glimpsed the rest of the action from the opened door of the break room as he tried to stop shivering. Dad got in the ambulance and rode away at breakneck speed. The group broke up and Roger trudged toward the office with Sue, who sobbed as she walked. The shop guys went back to work, but Brick saw Sam sitting in the break room and walked his way.

“You okay?” he asked, filling the small doorway.

“Jesus,” Sam said. “I don’t think so.” He tried to stand, but didn’t. “What the hell happened? Something to do with the rain?”

“Nah,” Brick said, scratching the stubble on his fat neck. “From what I heard, Jimmy lost track of where he was.”

“How does that lead to a leg like that?” Sam asked, trying to forget the image.

“Most dangerous place to be in a mine,” Brick said, “is where you’re not supposed to be.” Roger had said the same thing. “Loader came around the corner, Jimmy was standing there. Not the loader’s job to look out for Jimmy.”

Sam thought of the giant hinged contraption Roger had showed him on his first day. Ten tons at least, sharp edges all around. “Jesus,” he said again.

“Yep,” Brick said. “Least he tried to jump out of the way. Otherwise, wouldn’t have been Jimmy’s leg. Would’ve been Jimmy.”

Sam stood then, wobbling a bit. The chills had come back in the rain, and the barfing hadn’t helped. “Back to work,” he said. Not quite one o’clock yet. A couple of hours until quitting time.

“Nah, you go on home.”

Sam thought of Dad, on his way to the hospital with Jimmy. “I’ll go when the work’s done.”

Sam worked on the plates and thought of Jimmy, who he’d probably never meet. Even if they saved the leg and enough blood to keep his heart pumping, the man wouldn’t be on mine property again soon. Dad had mentioned such men, who’d never worried about being underground until they got hurt, then weren’t fool enough to try again. As

Sam cut the second plate, he wondered what he was fool enough to try again. Nashville? California? Michelle? Julie? Would she remember him? Probably. You don't forget your prom date, even if he's terrible, and Sam wasn't, at least as far as he remembered. He'd picked her up in Dad's truck and they'd marched down the decorated stairway at the Holiday Inn in Jasper. After chicken and mashed potatoes, they'd danced to most of the songs, though Sam had mostly moved to the heavier tunes. It seemed funny now that they would play Cinderella or Stryper at a high school prom. And of course Tesla. They'd danced closest to "Love Song" with its picked acoustic that helped Sam realize what he wanted to do with his life.

He shivered as the press lowered on the metal. The rain had made him feel worse, but quitting time was half an hour away. He'd had to cut each plate twice, because somehow he'd mismeasured the first time. He thought again of prom night, and the decisions he'd made. Nothing had seemed difficult under the foam stars and plastic palm trees. Go to California and start a rock band. But by the time he graduated, Nashville seemed closer. Safer. Dad had called it "a good first stop" when it became clear that Sam was leaving no matter what. Julie had moved on by then, and Jake had grown insufferable in his holy wooing of Libby. Sam had money for a Greyhound ticket to Nashville, but not one to L.A., and that's what it had come down to. A stupid reason. How much money had he put in his gas tank to cruise that year with people he didn't know anymore? Surely enough for a ticket to California, his great doglegged what-if.

Sam shivered again, this time violently. His torso spasmed as he pushed the last plate forward, and he nearly fell on top of the metal press. Then his left hand burned as if on fire. He recoiled, dropping the plate and squeezing his gloved hand under his arm. His

eyes locked shut and tears spurted onto his nose and cheeks. The only sound was ringing in his ears, but he must have been shouting, because Brick and two other men came running. He saw their mouths move before he heard their words.

“—okay?” Brick said.

“Fingers,” Sam whispered. “Hurts.” They were still pinched under his right armpit, burning. “Think they’re broken.”

Brick leaned forward to look at the cutting press, and when Sam followed his eyes, he saw the blood. A jagged trail of it running from the blade to the edge of the cutter and onto the floor. Sam closed his eyes again.

“I’ve got to take a look,” Brick said loudly, and put his hands on Sam’s left arm, pulling gently. It hurt too much.

“No,” Sam said. “I’m fine.” His knees buckled under him and he shook as he dropped to the floor. Brick held on to his arm and his left hand came loose. From his back, Sam saw that the four fingers of the glove were wide open and stained red.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Brick said as if it were a prayer. “Okay, buddy, I’m gonna have to get this glove off.”

“No.” Sam didn’t want to see, but he was too tired stop the big man.

“Ready? One, two, three.” He slid the glove off of Sam’s right hand. Sam’s eyes rolled back from the pain. “Oh God,” Brick said. “Jesus Christ.” Sam looked at his hand. His little finger was completely gone. The next finger had been cut higher, and the next higher still. A diagonal cut ran through the nail of his index finger. A straight line from a straight blade. Sam shivered as he watched blood leap from the wounds, glad he’d already thrown up. His stomach had finally settled. Far away, Brick shouted orders, and it

sounded like someone might be looking for his fingers. “Fell in the machine,” he heard. Then Guaman’s voice. Or Roger’s. He’d pissed himself, but didn’t care. His ears rang louder, and he just wanted to quit shivering.



## Chapter Six

Growing up in Arthur, Sam always had the consolation that it could have been worse. He could have grown up in Oakland City. Four miles west of Arthur on the other side of the Pike-Gibson county line, Oakland City was poorly named. With a population of around 2,500, it had never been a pleasant place in Sam's lifetime. Dad sometimes mentioned its heyday in the '60s, when it had a skating rink (which doubled as an icehouse), a movie theater, a drive-in, and at least two carhop burger joints. Like every other town in the area, though, it subsisted largely on the local mines. As coal production slowed to a trickle over the past few decades, Oakland suffered a familiar fate, though the hit seemed harder somehow. Unlike Petersburg or Princeton, Oakland had no stores left on its old Main Street, and since they had widened and repaved Highway 64, which ran south of the old storefronts, the previous generation's cruising lane had faded into a Midwestern ghost town. Sam hadn't been back since high school, and even then, he'd mostly driven through Oakland on his way to a movie in Princeton or Evansville. He remembered dark store windows, a dingy video rental store with a creepy, curtained 18-and-up room, and the IGA grocery.

Nothing outside Sam's hospital window suggested things had changed. He saw the rear wall of the old Oak Lanes bowling alley and a few loose bricks that had fallen onto the cracked pavement lot. Past that, an unmowed patch of grass that used to contain a gas station, and a row of shoddy houses with rusty TV aerials tilting from their roofs. The most troublesome part of the view was that it meant he occupied a bed at the Oakland City hospital. Barring imminent death, Pike County folk had always known that the sick and injured had best skip Oakland and head to Evansville for medical treatment. Even calling it a hospital stretched the definition. It had one story, a longish front structure that housed administration, and then two narrow wings that ran behind the offices. If there were more than fifty rooms in the building, Sam would have been shocked.

He didn't remember arriving, and only recalled the first day or two in flashes. He saw a doctor, older than dirt and sporting two days' worth of stubble, stitching his hand in a small blue room, but the pain (or the pain meds) had knocked him back out. Later, the same doctor stood over him with a chart in a different, yellow room, telling a nurse that the bandages needed changing. Dad stood in the corner, under a dimly buzzing fluorescent. Again, he'd drifted off without a word.

His first words didn't come until late afternoon on a sunny day. His second or third one there. Thirsty in an empty room. The call button lay on the bed next to his left hand, which had been bandaged and taped to the size of a small bread loaf. He reached with his right arm, but couldn't span his chest, let alone reach the button. Maury Povich blasted from the wall-mounted TV. Another bed sat to Sam's right, unoccupied.

“I’m thirsty,” he said, a hoarse croak. No response. “Thirsty,” he said louder, and then coughed. No one came. The door stood open to a dim hallway. His hand throbbed, but he had no sense of the wound. Fingers or no, the bandages wrapped a ball of pain. A headache pounded in his temples, and he still felt flush. A few machines beeped to his left, and the wall clock ticked away with oversized military digits. Probably for calling time of death. Ten minutes passed before a nurse walked by the open door, jarring to a stop after glancing at Sam’s open eyes.

“Well hey, hon,” she said, entering the room. She wore deep red lipstick and scrubs covered in unicorns. A roundish white belly showed between the shirt and pants. She flashed smoker’s teeth. “How you feeling?”

“I’ve been better.”

“Course you have,” she said. “My name’s Tina, and I’m the nurse on duty today.” As she scrawled her name in all-caps on a dry-erase board, Sam wondered if she meant the nurse for this room, this wing, or the whole hospital.

“Good to meet you,” Sam said. “You think I could get something for the pain.” His voice came out scratchy, and he coughed again. His hand throbbed harder.

“I’ll tell the doctor you’re awake and see what he says.” She made a few marks on the papers she carried with her, and then walked out the door.

The same ancient doctor from his hazy recollections, Harold Ropp, came in later and told Sam he’d lost most of three fingers on his left hand. Someone from the mine had brought them to the hospital in an insulated lunchbox a couple of hours after he’d sewn up Sam’s wound, but they’d been covered in grease and dirt and rust, severed for too long. Unsalvageable. Dr. Ropp let Tina up the pain medication and shuffled out the door.

No questions about how Sam was holding up, or if he needed to talk to anyone, and Sam liked that fine. What would talking accomplish? He just wanted the pain to go away. Tina fiddled with the IV bag and asked Sam if he needed anything else. He asked for water, and she nodded as she followed the doctor out the door.

Dad showed up later that afternoon. When he walked in the room, some show with witches and monsters played on the TV. Sam had to stare a moment to recognize him. The fluorescent lights didn't do any favors, but Dad's face looked drawn and pale. A Pepsi can hung in one hand.

"Hi, Dad."

He walked in and lowered himself into one of the beige chairs against the wall.

"How you doing?" he asked as he sat.

"Silly question," Sam said. Dr. Ropp had asked the same question, and it seemed just as pointless now. Sam turned the TV volume down with his good hand, just as a monster got its head lopped off. Tina had moved the remote to the right side of the bed.

"Only if I already know the answer," Dad said as he spit into the Pepsi can.

"You can't guess?"

"Guessing's not knowing."

Sam gripped the TV controller hard. "I guess I'll never play the violin again." He said it as a joke, something Dad would say in this situation. But he choked before the last word, and had to scratch at the side of his nose to cover the welling in his eyes. He would not cry in front of Dad.

"I didn't know you could play the violin." Dad spat again as Sam looked out the window at a squirrel running across the wall of the bowling alley. "Need anything?"

Another silly question. He needed his fingers back, needed a plane ticket to California. Or he did, when he had fingers. Now he just had a giant club of gauze and no need for the producer's number. But Dad wasn't asking about that. He wanted to know if Sam wanted a Coke or some Cheez-Its from the vending machine.

"No, I'm good."

Tina appeared in the doorway. "You need something, Mr. Hightower?" Sam looked to Dad, but Tina's eyes were on Sam.

"Um, no," Sam said. Apparently in a hospital every question had to be asked at least twice.

"Oh," Tina said. "I thought you pushed your button." Sam looked down at his good hand, still wrapped around the TV controller, which also housed the call button. "No problem, hon," she said, then looked to Dad. "Welcome back, Jesse. Thought that chair looked pretty lonely without your butt in it." She winked and then slipped out the door.

"All I hear is 'your butt' and 'looked pretty,'" Dad hollered after her. "Well, son, if you're good, I'm gonna slip out and find a payphone. Jake and Granma'll want to know how you're doing. Anybody else you want me to call?"

Sam shook his head. There really wasn't anyone.

He closed his eyes as Dad walked out, focusing on the hum of the lights. An E-flat. Sam had watched Dad sit in a room like this before, if a little brighter and cheerier. It had mostly been with Danny, though Sam had occupied the other bed for a day or so when he was, what, seven? Eight? He still had the scar on his right side, faint and white. He had no memory of the procedure, but could still picture Mom sitting next to Dad, her

hand tight in his, as their two youngest boys rested. Where had Jake been? Probably at school, or with Granddad and Granma. Dad's hair had been darker then, and the lines in his face less deep. Mom had been young and pretty, the only way Sam could picture her.

He opened his eyes and looked out the window at the bowling alley, waiting for the few visitors he could expect. The light through the window grew richer as afternoon turned to evening. Dr. Ropp said he could have gone home today, except that they were treating him with mondo antibiotics, since the metal shear hadn't exactly been sterile. On top of that, Sam also had a touch of bronchitis, which they wanted to monitor for a day or two. So he lay there and divided his attention between bowling alley squirrels and reruns. Occasionally, someone walked by his open door, but he started to wonder if he was the only patient in the hospital. And for that matter, if Dr. Ropp was the only physician.

The pain meds made Sam sleepy, and when he dozed, his dreams were vivid. Sometime around four or five, he drifted off and imagined Michelle visiting him in his room. She didn't speak, but the longer she sat, the more blood-soaked his bandage became. He tried to cover it with his sheets, but they turned red, too, and he put his head down in shame. When he looked back up, Julie Granderson sat in the chair. Squirrel feet clicked on the tile floor as she leaned closer to his wound, fascinated. When she sat back up, her face had changed again. Sam looked into his own eyes, as if his face were against a mirror. Then he sat in the chair. His brother Danny lay in the bed, small and fragile. The room had changed to the one he'd remembered earlier, on the top floor of an Indianapolis hospital, looking out on the city at night. Danny smiled at him. The blood had disappeared from the sheets. Sam opened his mouth to speak, but his chest clinched in terror that Danny would die in front of him, though he knew that wasn't how it happened.

He tried to push himself up from the chair, but his left hand was missing and he fell to the floor. He heard Danny's voice from above him, but couldn't make out the words.

Beeping machines filled his ears.

Sam jerked awake at a knock on his door, opening his eyes much wider than necessary to take in the room. Granma stood in the doorway, an oversized Cardinals T-shirt drooped near her knees, her hair freshly permed. "Hi there, son," she said as she hobbled into the room. She called all the men in the family "son."

"Come in," he said, wiping sleep from his eyes. "Have a seat." With Granma, there were three topics he could always turn to for easy conversation. Church, local gossip, and baseball. "Cards playing tonight?"

"Nope." She heaved into the suddenly too-small chair. "Played this afternoon. Lost to the Pirates, if you can believe that. Alma called to talk and I missed three innings, but got to see us lose anyway." Only Granma thought of watching a loss as a privilege.

"We'll get 'em tomorrow." A moment passed before he saw the tears in Granma's eyes. "You okay?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm fine." She waved her hand as if shooing a gnat. "Silly to come in here all worked up. You're the one hurt."

"I'm feeling okay right now," Sam lied. Thinking about it, he had probably told more lies to Granma in his life than anyone else.

"Well, that's good. Probably got some good medicine, if I know Doc Ropp." Sam hadn't realized she knew him, and had no idea what the comment meant. Was he slipping people oxy or something? She sighed. "Just thought I was done with mine accidents is all."

“It wasn’t really a mine accident,” Sam said. “More of a machinery accident.” Or a stupid, my-own-damn-fault accident, if he were being honest.

“Lot of hurt comes out of those mines,” she said. Another squirrel traipsed across the bowling alley, this time shooing off a blackbird that had landed nearby. “That scar on Granddad’s back came from the mines, you know.”

“I didn’t.” He remembered the scar, a long, rimpled line that ran down one shoulder blade. Granddad had spent a year or two mining long before Sam was born, but he’d never connected the two.

“Oh my yes,” Granma said, building up steam. “And your great-great-uncle Revis lost a leg blasting coal.” Sam didn’t know he’d had a great-great-uncle Revis. “And don’t get me started on your dad.” Sam wouldn’t, but it didn’t matter. “Takes awful risks down there. Always has.”

“He’s careful, from what I hear.” He had no idea whether it was true for Dad or just the people Dad managed.

She looked sideways at Sam, and then started fishing around in her enormous purse. “Want some chewing gum?”

Before Sam could answer, Jake’s voice boomed from the hallway. “Danny, get over here. I don’t have any change for a candy bar.”

“Don’t shout,” came Libby’s voice after.

Jake appeared in the doorway wearing a too-tight polo shirt tucked into wrinkled khakis over white tennis shoes.



“Hey, little brother,” he said as Libby scooted past him through the door. She walked to Sam’s bed and put her hand on his shoulder, jarring him just enough to send a new wave of pain through his hand. He tensed.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she said, and he knew she meant it. Libby’s emotions were excessive, not artificial.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. The only phrase he might need for the foreseeable future.

“I brought you a *Dispatch*,” Grandma said from behind Libby, leaning forward with a grunt and tossing it with impressive accuracy on to the meal tray next to Sam’s bed.

“I don’t know if he can read the paper right now, Granma,” Jake said. Libby looked embarrassed.

“One of you can hold it for him,” Granma said.

“I don’t need to read the paper right now,” Sam said. The *Press-Dispatch* covered all the news fit to print in Pike County, and since that took up less than three pages, it filled out the other thirty pages with random pictures from the past week, notes from all the local churches, and “locals and personals” detailing who’d visited who’s house or who’d gone on vacation and where. Sam glanced at the ruffled paper on the tray. It had opened to a picture of a woman holding up a squarish box in front of a bank teller window. “McLaughlin Wins 3-in-1 Poncho in First Winslow Bank Drawing,” the caption read. The woman didn’t smile.

#

Early Sunday morning, Dr. Ropp told Sam he could go home once Tina removed his IV. Sam lay in bed until noon waiting for it to happen. In the long hours of dozing and

watching reruns, he'd decided that this was no longer an operating hospital, that Doc Ropp and his sidekick Tina had squatter's rights, offering made-up medicine to made-up patients. Somehow, Sam had been delivered to them by mistake, and they were doing their best to avoid discovery. It would all be on the front page of the *Evansville Courier* this time next week, with Sam's droopy-lidded mine ID photo on the front page.

He'd begun plotting a jailbreak when Roger Pirkle walked into the room, looking like he hadn't slept in days. His stubble had crossed into beard territory, covering the coal tattoo on his cheek. He held his rumpled Black Stallion Mining ball cap in his left hand and a small paper bag in the right. With Roger's long arms, the hat touched his leg at the knee. Sam tried to sit up, but with one good hand, he only succeeded in scooting down and slightly sideways into the thin mattress.

"Don't get up," Roger said, waving a shaky hand. "You got a few minutes?"

"More than a few, I guess." Sam imagined Tina in a room somewhere, treating a CPR dummy.

Roger moved strangely outside of the mine property, as if he didn't know how to hold himself. He sat back awkwardly, all lanky sinew, and turned the hat slowly between his thumbs and forefingers. "Feeling any better?" he asked. The question struck Sam as more sensible than most, in that it didn't assume "good" or "okay" to be possible.

"A little. Still hurts, but not as much. And the flu or whatever is mostly gone."

"Good to hear. Saw your daddy at church this morning. Him and Jake and everybody's just heartsick about this." Sam watched Roger pucker and unpucker his lips for a moment. "Me too," he added, as if Sam didn't consider him part of "everybody." He stared at the wall briefly, and then sat forward suddenly, reaching to the floor. "Almost

forgot,” he said, opening the bag and pulling out some Tupperware. “Jean sent this for you.” He leaned forward and sat it on the tray table. “Rhubarb.”

Sam looked at the container. He assumed it was pie, and that Jean must be Roger’s wife.

Roger saw too late that Sam couldn’t open it, started to rise again, and then sat back in the chair. “Ah,” he said, then paused again.

“That looks good,” Sam said to puncture the suffocating tension. He was a cripple now. People would notice, and then act like they didn’t.

“Best in the county.” Roger sat forward again, so quickly Sam almost flinched. “There’s no good way to say this,” he said, twisting the hat some more. “Are you gonna sue us?”

Sam’s eyebrows furrowed down before he could stop them. “Um,” he said. “I’m not really—” He didn’t know how to respond. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind. Though, now that he considered it, he figured it would have eventually. But what did he have to sue over? They didn’t push him into the blade, and the cutter itself worked fine. Were they responsible in some way he didn’t realize? “I hadn’t thought about it,” he mumbled.

Roger looked as if he’d said too much. He took his glasses off and cleaned them with his shirt. “Well, I’m half surprised some lawyer hasn’t already been in here to see you,” he said, apparently deciding the cat was out of the bag. “Couple of real doozies around here that keep an eye on mine stuff.”

“Huh.”

“Probably didn’t figure on you going to Oakland,” Roger said, almost to himself. “You’d gone to Evansville, you would have seen them by now.” Sam wondered if that’s why he was here. To avoid attention. Maybe the man with the horrible leg injury was smoking cigars with the best lawyers in the Tri-State.

“Huh,” Sam said again. Roger needed to say some things, and Sam had learned from Dad not to stop someone who wants to talk.

“Here’s the situation,” Roger said. “We’ve had to shut the mine down for a couple of days. Federal inspector came in to make sure there’s no problems.” He paused. “Two accidents puts you on the radar in a big way.” He cleared his throat. “A big fucking way.” He looked at Sam. “Sorry.”

“I’ve heard worse.” Studio musicians gave sailors a run for their money.

“Anyway,” Roger continued. “Inspector signed off, so we’re in the clear and ready to open up tomorrow.”

“That’s good news.”

“Well, if that’s all there is to it, it is. But if I have to call corporate and tell them we’re getting sued, they’re gonna take a long look at whether we’re worth the trouble.”

Sam thought of the sign at the entrance to the property. Friendship Mine. “So, what? If I sue you guys, they’ll shut the mine down?”

“I don’t know, Sam. It could happen. We’re probably only open another five years anyway, picking the leavings of what they left behind in the eighties. It’s why we only run one shift. Not worth their money to run more. But it’s jobs.” He stopped here again to clean his glasses, even though they couldn’t possibly be dirty again, and then he looked through them at Sam. “You heard of worker’s comp?”

“Sure,” Sam said, though he had almost no idea what it meant. Money for people who get hurt on the job, as far as he knew.

“The way it works is, if you sign papers saying you won’t sue us, we cover your medical bills and pay your salary until you’re recovered.”

Sam thought again about what there could be to sue over, or if it mattered whether he had a case. He didn’t read the paper much, but he knew mines were the bad guys these days. Barfing up coal to kill polar bears, if you believed what you read. But that didn’t jive with the people he’d seen at Friendship, or the ones he’d known growing up. Hard workers. Quick with a joke. Sam’s hand throbbed beneath its bandage. What were the odds of winning a lawsuit, and what would it mean to people here if he did win? Roger, Dad, Guaman, Brick, Julie, out of work? God, he’d gotten himself entangled quick. And this worker’s comp money sounded like a done deal if he wanted it. How much could a plane ticket and a couple of months’ rent cost in L.A.? But he wasn’t going to L.A. How many times would he have to remind himself? The realization covered him like a cold fog. He couldn’t move, or think. The single-mindedness, the focus he’d had since returning home had dissolved.

“Can I think about it?” Sam asked.

“Wish you could. God as my witness, I do. But corporate’s gonna make the call tonight. Whether to keep putting money into us, or move it somewhere with higher production.” He looked like he might cry, or throw up. Sam never wanted to be responsible for people the way Roger was. “Rotten damn thing to hit you with, Sam. I know that. But shit rolls downhill, and we’re at the bottom.”

Sam imagined telling Dad about a lawsuit. Telling Granma. Looking at the out-of-work men on Sunday mornings. If he could still escape to California, it might be different. But he couldn't. He'd come home, and it had trapped him. Possibly for good, like a rat on one of those sticky traps. The ones where they pull and fight themselves bloody, and then get tossed out with the next morning's garbage.

“I won't sue.”

## Chapter Seven

The fingers on Sam's left hand made their absence known quickly. Even with the club bandage replaced by a smaller one that allowed some movement in his thumb and index finger, he couldn't pour a drink from a two-liter bottle, open an envelope, or tie his shoes. The things he could still do took embarrassing effort. Putting on pants, keeping them on while trying to piss standing up, making a sandwich, putting toothpaste on his toothbrush. Actions using just his index finger and thumb, he supposed, would become easier in time, once the tip of the finger healed completely. The other three fingers were either gone or mostly gone. His middle finger reached only to the lowest knuckle, while his ring finger had been severed at its base. The blade had not only removed his little finger, but also taken a sliver of the hand below it.

While changing bandages, Sam would sit on his bed in Dad's basement for long stretches, slowly spreading what remained of his fingers back and forth, trying to line up the scabbed diagonal edges into the straight edge of the blade. His memory of the accident was unclear, but the wound suggested he had turned both hands inward to try to catch himself as he stumbled forward. When he flexed his fingers, he could feel the absent ones as clearly as the remaining ones. Doc Ropp had told him there could be

phantom pain, but so far he'd only experienced the occasional sensation that they were still there, somewhere under the observable world. Besides, the flexing seemed like a good way to keep his remaining hand from freezing up entirely. He'd had an appointment with a physical therapist in Jasper to try to work through any complications, but Sam had lost the card and didn't have much interest anyway. His left hand was ruined, and no amount of therapy would restore it.

Sam stockpiled easily opened junk food in his room, but still had to venture out. Man cannot live by Slim Jim alone, even if he figures out how to open it with one hand and his teeth. He visited Granma once every day or two, walking the mile and a half down the two roads that separated their houses. The late July sun scorched him most days, but he threw on a pair of sunglasses and one of Dad's old mining caps and sought out Granma's cooking. She generally had a feast prepared. Pot roast, fried chicken, dumplings, casseroles, or a variety of boxed meals from the IGA. Tacos made frequent appearances. Sam enjoyed the food, but also Granma's latest gossip from Arthur and Winslow, which kept her from asking too much about his hand. He'd get the usual "How are you doing today?" or "How are you healing up?", but she seemed content with his "fine" and moved on to how the Church of God down the road was getting awfully uppity for paving their parking lot when gravel worked just fine.

Otherwise, Sam slept a lot and watched TV. He hated himself for it, remembering the focus he'd had on collecting paychecks and getting out of town, but the pain pills made him groggy and he didn't know what else to do anyway. His trips out of the house always came while Dad was at work. They weren't avoiding each other, exactly, but what little good will had developed between them while Sam worked at the mine had



evaporated since the accident. Dad's glances seemed full of judgment. Maybe of the accident, but Sam's conversation with Roger before leaving the hospital hadn't helped. Dad had driven him home after he was discharged, and during the drive, Sam mentioned Roger's proposal.

"What did you tell him?" Dad had asked as they bounced over one of the railroad crossings between Oakland City and Arthur.

"I told him I'd take the worker's comp." Each jostle felt like fire at the end of his left arm.

"Don't you think you should have talked to me first?"

Sam considered the question. Had he made the wrong choice, or was Dad just hurt at not being consulted?

"Never crossed my mind," Sam said. "Roger needed an answer."

"No, Roger *wanted* an answer, and you gave him what he wanted." Dad spit into his Pepsi can. Did he know about the corporate higher-ups, or what a lawsuit might have meant for his job?

"Well, it's done."

"Bullshit. You haven't signed anything."

"I said yes. You want me to go back on that?" They hit the last of the train tracks, sending a jolt of pain up Sam's arm. He sucked breath between his teeth, but Dad didn't notice.

"Decisions can change. Happens all the time."

"Maybe for you," Sam said, though it wasn't true.

"Goddammit, you're just like your mother sometimes."

The air in the cab of the truck went cold, and Sam's arm quit throbbing. Dad gripped the steering wheel a few times, the only sign that he'd said more than he meant to. Sam focused on the dusty dashboard. He didn't know how to take Dad's words. An insult? Truth? How was he like his mother? He had no idea. He wanted to ask, to exploit an impossible instance of Dad mentioning her, but the words had been too angry.

They'd stuck to pleasantries since. Dad helped Sam when needed, changing his bandages and bringing food Sam couldn't have prepared himself, but rarely making conversation that didn't relate to the newspaper or the weather. In a way, the mine had finally connected them, however imperfectly. Few people could understand Sam's predicament better than Dad, who had watched it play out for friends and co-workers over the years. Sam considered bringing it up some days, as they sat winding gauze around his hand, but he always faltered. They shared the mine, but not the injury. Or the incompetence. Dad had spent most of forty years working in coal mines, and all he had to show in the way of wounds were a few minor scars and coal tattoos. He survived because he knew how. Sam had lasted a little over a month before crippling himself permanently, and that came to hurt more than his hand. He'd finally been measured directly against his father.

#

On the last Saturday in July, Dad rose early and told Sam he was going to the Trading Post, a small building on the highway between Arthur and Winslow that served as both a restaurant and a hardware store. He usually went a couple days a week to visit with locals, talk weather and politics, and have a cheap plate lunch. Shortly after he drove off, Jake left a message on the answering machine saying he and Danny might stop by in

the afternoon. Sam hated to think of Danny staring at his injury, asking questions, or sitting pale and silent, so he decided to walk to Granma's, even though he didn't normally visit on the weekend. Jake would still find him there, but Danny had toys at Granma's to distract him. The sun poured brightly through the basement window, so he went to grab his sunglasses from the dresser, only to remember he'd tucked them in the back pocket of his jeans when it had grown overcast on his last walk. When he dug them out of his dirty clothes pile, he found one of the lenses had busted, probably when Sam had stepped through the laundry on his way out the door.

The summer sun, high and white in the sky, nearly blinded Sam as he stepped out of the house. Humidity drooped the leaves of nearby trees. A swarm of gnats hovered in the shade as he started down the driveway, creating a stereophonic buzz as he walked through it. The pond had a sickly green algae bloom on one corner, but the breeze that had blown it there had disappeared, replaced by air that felt like pancake syrup. The dogs that sometimes barked at him on his walk were nowhere to be seen, too hot to care about passersby. By the time Sam hit the highway, sweat had soaked his T-shirt and he felt a headache coming on. His left hand throbbed, and he held it to his chest as he walked. Cicadas roared from the tree line on the opposite side of the road as a coal truck thundered past. Sam grabbed his hat with his good hand to keep it from flying away. The highway shimmered behind the truck like a charcoal grill, filling the air with scents of burnt rubber and petroleum.

The Quick Pick had stood on Highway 61 since before Sam was born. It had gone by many names over the years, and hadn't actually been called Quick Pick since Sam was in middle school, but for whatever reason, the name stuck. It had been little more than a

crooked shack when Sam was young, with a dirt floor and two mechanical gas pumps. Granddad had always bought him a candy bar if they stopped for gas, and Sam remembered flypaper hanging from the rafters. Twenty years ago, the owner had paid for a complete rebuild that converted the shack into a modern gas and shop combo. The sign had changed from hand-painted to manufactured, with a large red “M” above the gas prices. Half a dozen pumps stood outside, and a cooler section filled a wall inside with drinks, ice cream, and frozen pizzas. Like much of Pike County, though, it grew old quickly, already worn around the edges.

When Sam walked in, the clerk had her back to the door, talking on her cell phone. “Then tell your brother to stop hitting you,” she said as he walked to the drink cooler. The store smelled of cigarette smoke. After perusing the sunglasses, he settled on a pair of black wraparounds and fished in his pocket to see if he had the five dollars to pay for them. His worker’s comp checks arrived on time, but Sam rarely took cash out of the bank.

He set the sunglasses and an RC Cola on the counter and glanced at the newspaper tray. The *Courier* said that the Toyota plant in Princeton was hiring. The *Dispatch* showed a picture of an overturned hog truck.

“Sam?” the clerk said. He looked up, and found himself staring at frosted bangs teased within an inch of their life.

“Julie?” He lowered his left hand from the counter to his side. “Um, hi.” Why was she working at the gas station? He’d just seen her ready to go underground at the mine a few weeks ago. Had she been fired? His confusion must have shown, because she smiled.

“Well, I guess we’re both surprised,” she said. Her teeth were yellower, and her face fuller, but her smile still lit up the room. “How you doing?” she asked. “Your poor hand.” She said it in the same voice Granma used when she spoke of a family in the church that had fallen on hard times.

“Yeah.” He wished he had a jacket pocket to stick it into. “I’m good. You know.” He sounded stupid. “You work here?”

“Saturdays and Sundays,” she said. “I’m at the mine during the week.”

“Two jobs? Impressive.”

“Two jobs for two boys. That’s what I always tell people.”

“Kids, huh?” Of course she had kids. She was Sam’s age, and people Sam’s age had kids.

“Yep. Jaden’s twelve and Kyler’s ten.”

On prom night, she’d told him the names she had picked out for her kids. They hadn’t been Jaden and Kyler. “That’s great,” he said, looking at her shirt. A replica of the Zeppelin ’76 concert T-shirt. When he glanced back up, she seemed embarrassed. He’d been staring at her chest. “Zeppelin,” he said, quickly pointing. “We used to listen to Zeppelin Four when we’d drive around. Remember?” The stereo in his Chevy Nova had been garbage, but Bonham’s drums on “When The Levee Breaks” had still shaken the windows.

The door rang as an elderly woman walked in the store. “How could I forget?” Julie said, laughing. “We used to argue over the words to ‘Stairway.’” She looked through Sam, lost a bit in remembering. There had been no internet in those days, and if lyrics weren’t included in the liner notes, you guessed. Sam had argued that Robert Plant

sang about a “sprinkling” for the May Queen, while Julie had been firm in her belief that it was a “spring clean.”

“You were right,” Sam said. “I looked it up a few years back. It’s ‘spring clean,’ but I have no idea what it means.”

“Whatever, I was right,” she said with another smile.

“Excuse me, miss,” the little old lady said from Sam’s right. “Could I pay for my gas?” Sam looked at her, with her large round bifocals and permed gray hair. No doubt Granma knew her. Two more people stood behind her in line, though he hadn’t seen them enter.

“Sure thing, ma’am,” Julie said. “Sorry about that. Just catching up with an old friend.” She nodded at Sam. The old woman looked him up and down, doubtful. He wore a plain white T-shirt, drawstring shorts, flip-flops, and one of Dad’s grungy mine hats, because those were the only clothes he could get on and off easily. He hadn’t really considered they also made him look homeless. But Julie hadn’t given him the look the old woman did.

“Tell you what,” he said to Julie. “I’m gonna get out of here and let you work.” He moved toward the door and almost knocked over the newspaper tray. “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“How could you not?” And then as he walked out the door, “Glad you’re feeling better.”

Sam stood in the parking lot for a moment watching a starling pick at a dark spot on the pavement, took a long swig from his RC, and finagled the sunglasses onto his head.

Granma wasn't home, so Sam walked back to Dad's. Toward the end, sweat began seeping into his bandage. The burn brought tears to his eyes. He'd have to bathe his hand in peroxide when he got home. He looked down at himself. His appearance couldn't have impressed Julie. Bandaged, bedraggled, and barely dressed. It had been a long time since he cared what anyone here thought of him.

By the time he got to the front porch, the RC bottle swung empty in his good hand. He tossed it in the kitchen garbage can on his way through the door, and then pulled his shirt and shorts carefully off, kicked the flip-flops into the corner, and tossed Dad's hat onto the table. He stood in his underwear, also soaked, and luxuriated in the air conditioning. Dad had grumbled once or twice that Sam kept it running all day. Sam looked down at his midsection, which had been shrinking despite his Slim Jim and pot roast diet. Likely because of his walks, or that he only ate a full meal once every couple of days. Either way, his pale belly barely extended past the waistband of his boxers. He'd never been heavy, but had the typical shape of a Midwestern male. Skinny at both ends, bulbous in the middle. He'd been a rail in high school, around one-thirty-five soaking wet.

He could see the small white scar on his side, where they'd taken a biopsy of his kidney as a boy. The scar should have been bigger, but they'd never done the full procedure. In the bathroom, he peeled the sweaty gauze from his hand, gritting his teeth as he tugged the parts that wanted to stick, and again as he poured peroxide over his wounds. In the mirror, he could see the scar on his side more clearly, and he carefully reached down with his left hand and pulled the skin with the palm of his hand to get a better look. Even this gentle pressure made his hand hurt, but he continued to learn what

he could and couldn't do. In the mirror, he saw the scar clearly, a small crescent on his pale skin. The scabs on his hand stood out much darker just above it.

His conversation with Julie had gotten the tunes from Zeppelin Four stuck in his head, so he went into Dad's bedroom to dig through the old record albums he assumed were still under the bed. Like the rest of the house, the bedroom still smelled dully of paint. Dad's old chest of drawers had a tall mirror against one wall, and the bed and dresser covered a few patches, but most of the wall space was empty. No pictures, no paintings. Junk covered the dresser. Pocket change, crumpled receipts, lone socks, a couple of hats. Dad always kept his bedroom surfaces cluttered like this, but it felt out of place surrounded by newness.

Under the bed, Sam found a soft rifle case that held an over-under shotgun Dad used for hunting and skeet shooting. One of the few things he and Jake might argue over someday. Behind it sat some nick-knack boxes of old Super 8 film, letters, postcards, and records. Sam pulled open the flaps on one box to find Conway Twitty staring back at him with a creepy grin. Most of the albums were Dad's from over the years, along with a few Mom had left behind. Sam couldn't remember which were who's anymore, mostly because their musical tastes had been similar. The Nashville Sound, with its strings and smooth background vocals. Sam could tell Dad a thing or two about that sound, if he wanted to hear it. About how much most studio musicians hated it, and about how easily it could be created in a computer these days. Sam had tried too hard to sneak a bit of the older, rowdier honky-tonk sound into at least one or two takes, but the artists and engineers didn't like it any more than the straight-up rock n' roll he'd occasionally offer. Too harsh. Too noisy. Too hard to mix.



In the second box, Sam found some Crystal Gayle and an Eagles greatest hits album. The last box held some of his and Jake's old read-along record books. The rock albums lay at the bottom. There had never been many, since Sam was the only one who listened to them, and Dad had been picky about what he'd allow in the house. No KISS, no Crüe, and only early Van Halen. The lone Aerosmith album was the first one, with its pleasant clouds on the cover. The Zeppelin albums rested at the bottom, and only three remained: *Zep II*, *Zep IV*, and *Physical Graffiti*. He'd once smuggled in a copy of *Houses of the Holy*, but Dad had thrown it in the garbage when he'd seen naked blonde asses on its cover.

The old Zenith record player sat on a table under the living room window, though to Sam's knowledge, he never used it. In fact, Sam had to check to make sure it still had a needle. He slid the second album of *Physical Graffiti* out of its insert and dropped the arm on "Side 3," always his favorite. "In the Light" hissed through the Zenith's tiny speakers. The song had an odd, ethereal quality to it anyway, thanks to Jimmy Page's pairing of the violin bow and acoustic guitar, and the compression from the speakers amplified it. If Sam's teen years had a sound, this must have been it. Rock n' roll through speakers too small for it. As the music played, he dug a clean pair of shorts and a T-shirt out of the laundry room and pulled them on carefully. Then he opened the living room window, air conditioner be damned, and went to the front porch. The volume faded a bit, but he got most of it. He plopped into Dad's beat-up rocking chair just as "Bron-Yr-Aur" began to play. Open C6 tuning. He closed his eyes and listened to the rolling arpeggios, trying to forget that he could no longer play them.

Several things vied for Sam's attention at once. Sweat ran down the back of his neck, and his left hand, hanging at the end of his dangling arm, throbbed heavily. Robert Plant's voice sang about never leaving someone. Coal trucks rattled on the distant highway. Beneath all of that, though, Sam heard another voice. One that wanted his attention. He resisted opening his eyes. Even with the pain in his hand, he was comfortable. A breeze chilled his sweat, and a frog croaked in the pond. He hoped the voice would stop, but it didn't.

"Sam!" It shouted from far away. Another coal truck banged along in the distance. "Sam! Over here!" Over where? He would have to open his eyes. Even with the cover of the porch, the sun shined bright and everything came in as a wash of light. The last notes of "Ten Years Gone" faded and the needle began to click. As Sam's eyes adjusted, he saw Guaman across the road, waving his arms as if guiding in a plane. Sam stood and stretched, and then went in to turn off the record. He thought he heard the word "tamales" as he turned. Sure enough, when he got around the pond and across the road, they were the cause of the hubbub. Guaman's wife, Pilar, had fresh tamales steaming.

"They will amaze you," Guaman said as they stood there. He'd been shoveling along one side of the driveway, maybe to plant something, but now he stood, leaning against the shovel handle, his gold teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he smiled. Sam still felt groggy, probably because he'd only slept twenty minutes according to the Zeppelin clock.

"Oh, you don't have to feed me," he said as Guaman stuck the business end of his shovel into the ground and walked toward the house.

“That’s true,” Guaman said without turning around, “now come and eat.” Sam followed him to the side door that opened into the kitchen. Did Guaman know that Sam’s handprints, along with Jake’s and Danny’s, were in the concrete sidewalk in front of it?

The kitchen hadn’t changed much. Same outdated wallpaper with fruit baskets on it. Same wobbly ceiling fan. Same Formica countertops. The only real difference was what those countertops held. When Dad had lived here, they held the same sort of junk as his bedroom dresser. Wads of paper, loose coins, a random wrench or screwdriver he’d forgotten to put away. Now, the counters held fresh vegetables and a long basket of bread. Several coupons lay to one side with a pair of scissors nearby. A large steamer sat on the gas stove, and the smells from it weakened Sam’s knees, like Granma’s pot roast.

“Sit at the table,” Guaman said. “I’m going to wash up.” He disappeared down the hallway, and Sam knew exactly where he went. Second door on the right, just past the linen closet. The table was much larger than the one Dad had moved to the new house. The back of his chair pushed against the wall as he got comfortable. It still felt strange to see such a familiar place dressed up so strangely. Like a famous actor playing against type.

Sam reached to untangle the long cord on the wall phone that hung next to the kitchen bar, an old habit from childhood. He couldn’t do much with one hand, but enjoyed the familiarity. Stretched out, it must have been at least twenty feet long, always a jumbled mess. He turned it over in his hand, looking for the receiver end, when Pilar walked into the room. She looked at him, and he couldn’t decide whether to keep examining the cord or just drop it. Instead, he held the knot in front of his chest and smiled.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello.” She gave him an angled glance from the corners of her eyes.

“I was just untangling this,” he said, finally dropping the cord. “Something I used to do.”

“You know much about our phones.”

Sam thought back to his 911 suggestion the night he’d mistakenly walked in their front door. “I guess I do,” he said, resting his hands awkwardly on the table, and then dropping the bandaged one below it.

“It is okay,” she said, stopping for a moment between the second and third words. “Help is good.” She stepped around a cabinet into the kitchen where Sam couldn’t see her.

He sat a while before Guaman came back wearing a clean shirt and pants. His cheeks were pink on both sides of his mustache, as were his hands. He sat in the chair next to Sam.

“It’s good to see you, chochera,” he said, smiling.

“Yeah, I’ve been scarce, I guess,” Sam said. Guaman didn’t seem to understand his meaning, but continued as Pilar banged around in the kitchen.

“I had to ask you over, because I miss our lunches. Few people eat in the break room, and it is sometimes lonely.” He crossed his arms, as if disgusted by the lack of camaraderie. “Your father says you are still at his house, but I wasn’t sure.” Sam usually left the house to go to Granma’s while Dad was at work. And if Dad was at work, so was Guaman.

“I see him sometimes,” said Pilar, who sat the breadbasket on the table. “He walks.” Then back to the kitchen.

“My wife,” Guaman said, “she tells me nada.”

“My husband does not ask,” came Pilar’s voice from the kitchen.

“So tell me,” Guaman said, with an endearing shift from smiling to serious, “how is your hand?”

“Healing, I guess.” Sam didn’t raise it above the table.

“That’s good,” Guaman said, reaching for a piece of bread. Pilar, who had returned with a bowl of steaming tamales, slapped his hand.

“Todavía no,” she said without looking at him.

“I was sorry to hear they could not—” he stopped and held his own hand in front of him, flexing the fingers as if they would give him the correct word. “Fix them.”

“Me too,” Sam said. He liked Guaman. Honesty came easy with him.

“I found them for you. In the machine.” It took Sam a moment to realize what Guaman meant. He’d fished Sam’s severed fingers out of the metal shear.

“Oh,” Sam said. What could he say? Hallmark didn’t make cards for that. “Thank you.” Guaman seemed equally wordless. Pilar looked at both of them.

“You can eat now,” she said.

And did they ever. After a short prayer in Spanish, they tucked in, and Pilar’s tamales were perhaps the best food Sam had ever tasted. Yellower than the ones he’d had in restaurants, with a sweet spice that mellowed some hot peppers. The meat—was it pork?—had a rich flavor he didn’t recognize. Guaman and Pilar kept the conversation light at first, but the topic moved naturally to mining. Guaman had spent years digging

underground in Peru, he said, mostly for gold and silver, though occasionally tin and copper. He'd intended to go to college. His parents had been professors in a town called Huaraz, but had been killed in a powerful earthquake when Guaman was still a teenager. With a younger brother to support, he'd gone where he could find money. He spoke of long hours and dangerous conditions, as well as companies that didn't value their employees as much as the metal in the ground.

"Some things never change," Sam said, trying to offer understanding.

"Oh, no," Guaman said. "Things change. The work is hard in Indiana, but we are treated like men." Or women, Sam thought, as Julie's face popped into his head. "It is different."

From down the hall, the baby began to cry. Pilar rose without a word and disappeared. Sam had forgotten about the baby. Guaman laid his own fork down and stretched. They had obliterated the tamales, and Sam could have eaten several more. In fact, he'd eaten more than his share.

"Pilar will make coffee after she feeds Beatriz," Guaman said. Sam had rarely seen the baby, except for glances from Dad's living room of the three of them on their porch some evenings. From that distance, the baby looked like a flour sack with black hair.

Guaman tossed his napkin onto his plate and headed toward the living room. Sam extricated himself from between the table and the wall and followed. As Guaman worked the old living room windows open to let in some fresh air, Sam wandered around the room, noting small scratches and dings on the walls, many of which he'd put there. He

stopped by the coat closet and examined the large drawings that hung on the wall. He remembered them from the night he'd mistakenly entered the house.

In the daylight, they seemed to be reproductions of some sort, blown up a little bigger than they should be. No color, just black and white with no shading. Four pictures hung in a row, each composed of crude two-dimensional drawings mixed with large amounts of writing that Sam didn't recognize.

"These were drawn a long time ago," Guaman said, now finished prying open the windows. "By a man named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala."

"Guaman?"

"Yes. My parents gave me his name. My mother studied him. He wrote a history of our country, long ago." Guaman leaned in and examined them, as if seeing them for the first time.

"Is that what the words are? History?"

"Some of them." Guaman put his finger to some of the words. "I cannot read much of it. The words are Quechua. What natives of Peru spoke before the conquistadors."

"They're impressive," Sam said, though they weren't. They looked like a fourth grader had drawn them. It reminded him of pictures Danny had brought home from elementary school when they were kids. Pilar walked through the dining room to the kitchen, holding the baby, still a black-haired sack. The sunlight through the windows grew orange.

“Not really,” Guaman said. “But they are important. I’ve tried to study them, but I don’t know enough. My parents were smarter.” He moved to a further picture. “I like this one best.”

Sam looked closely. A few large words ran across the top. The highest one looked like “conquest,” but he had no idea what the larger one below it said. The central image depicted two men sitting and facing each other. A few nondescript buildings stood behind them, and between them sat a variety of pots, cups, and bowls. The man on the left looked native to Sam, with a dark bowl haircut and toga-like robe. The man on the right had a long beard and more complicated clothing with buttons and a cape. They held a plate of something between them, and words came out of their mouths in comic book bubbles.

“What are they holding?” Sam thought the native offered food to the foreigner.

“Gold. Everything between them is gold.”

“What are they saying?”

“The Inca asks a question. ‘You eat this gold?’ he asks the Spaniard.”

“And what does the Spaniard say?”

“The Spaniard says ‘Yes, we eat this gold.’”

Sam stared at the picture as Beatriz made gurgling sounds in the kitchen and Pilar sang softly.

Later, Sam sat on Guaman’s porch, smoking a Swisher Sweet clasped between his teeth and sipping a mug of toe-curlingly strong coffee. Deep red sunlight cut through the heavy summer haze, casting a deep crimson over them. He worried he’d overstayed his welcome, at least with Pilar, but if he bothered her, she didn’t show it. She sat on the



porch with them for a while, rocking the baby. When the cigars came out, she gave Guaman a disapproving glance and went inside. Sam rarely smoked cigars, and even more rarely inhaled them, but he had a pleasant buzz going. The smoke tasted good on his tongue, and as he took it between the two remaining fingers on his left hand, he thought he'd grab a pack of cigarettes tomorrow. They watched Dad pull in the driveway across the road and go into the house. Sam wondered if Dad would miss him right away.

“There goes Mister Personality,” Sam said.

“What does that mean?” Guaman flicked ashes onto the flowers below the porch rail.

“Nothing really.”

“You're a serious man, and so is your father.” He took a long drag from his cigar.

“Two of the same do not always work well together. Like magnets.”

Sam exhaled smoke. “Are you like Yoda or something?”

“What is a Yoda?”

“Never mind.” Sam looking down at the flowers below him. Their ashes hung on the leaves, blowing like snow when the breeze worked up.

“Now there is something that will make you less serious,” Guaman said. Sam raised his eyes and looked across the road. Another car pulled into Dad's driveway, but Sam didn't recognize it. Not Jake's or Granma's. As it pulled to a stop in front of Dad's garage, Sam turned to Guaman.

“Who's that?”

“Less serious now,” Guaman said. “Maybe more serious later.” He laughed and slapped Sam on the shoulder as they watched Julie and her frosted bangs step out of the car.

## Chapter Eight

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, waiting for the steam to evaporate so he could assess his beard, Sam brushed his teeth. He'd gotten better at putting the toothpaste on the bristles one-handed, and in the weeks since the accident, he generally found his way around the bathroom more efficiently, though there were moments of maddening frustration this afternoon. Date prep required more steps than his new routine. Shaving cream seemed impossible, so he decided to trim his beard instead of remove it. Combined with his leaner face and neck-length hair, it made for a different person. A younger cousin, perhaps. One that looked a bit like Pacino in *Serpico*.

Sam hadn't planned on cologne, but he smelled too much like Dad's generic shampoo. An ancient bottle of Old Spice sat in the medicine cabinet. Sam let that possibility ferment while he checked his nose and ears—two locations that had only recently required attention. He spent ten minutes tracking down dental floss, finally finding it in the kitchen junk drawer. He'd developed some crazy eyebrow hairs, but decided he'd risk them rather than pluck them. Sam wasn't a "man's man," at least not in the sense most of the miners seemed to be, but he was mostly happy to follow God's suggestions on where hair should grow.

If grooming posed challenges, deciding what to wear was impossible. He had no dress clothes, and only one pair of jeans without holes. Dad referred to them as Sam's church jeans, even though he'd only accompanied Dad to church the one time since coming home. Though he hated it, Sam forced himself to wear Dad's brown shoes and one of his dress shirts. Western cut, unfortunately, but otherwise inoffensive. The hair, beard, and clothes combined for a look reminiscent of 1978.

The last date Sam had been on in Pike County had come during the Clinton Administration. He couldn't remember where he went then, and he had little idea where they'd go tonight. Julie had suggested dinner and a movie, which felt like the easy way out, though it'd been their preferred date in high school. They'd driven all the way to Reo once to watch *Jurassic Park* at the drive-in. She'd held his hand, and when the movie got scary, her nails had cut little moon-shaped holes in the back of his hand that left scars, two faint white crescents he could still see an inch below the scabby remains of his pinky and ring fingers. She couldn't hold that hand now. He worried what Julie would think of his injury. She'd seen it at the gas station, but mostly under a bandage. Doc Ropp had told him to leave the bandage off now, to give the wounds a chance to breathe. The scab of the two lower fingers made a rough oval, pink around the edges, while the ones at the tips of the other two looked like small raisins.

After cleaning trash out of the passenger floorboard, he headed out. Julie lived in Campbelltown, halfway between Arthur and the county seat of Petersburg. Everyone called it Cameltown, either because the highway twisted in a series of long curves and humps, or because they didn't care about silent Ps and Bs. He drove with the windows down, despite ninety-degree temps, because his A/C had crapped out months ago.

Between the humidity and the temperature, stretches of August in southern Indiana could feel like a sauna. Grass withered brown, water levels dropped, and a lot less people worked in their yards come evening. Already, Sam realized the mistake of a long-sleeved shirt. Sweat pooled under his arms, and he hoped the shirt's neutral color would be forgiving.

A variety of smells wafted into the cab as he drove. Burning garbage, coal truck exhaust, and hot asphalt choked him occasionally, but these odors often mixed with more pleasant ones. Fresh-mown grass from the few lawns that hadn't gone brown, charcoal smoke mingled with roasting meat, and breezes that blew across the road from the woods on its edge. Sweet, musty smells slipped from behind the trees, and though Sam couldn't name them, he remembered them.

Sam's truck had a straight shift, so he mostly steered with his left hand. He'd only started driving again this week, pinching the steering wheel between his thumb and remaining index finger. He tended to overcorrect more with the new, tenuous grip. On sharper curves, he sometimes drove over the lines, but with wide shoulders and few oncoming cars, he managed.

Julie lived in a trailer on the back side of her parents' property. The ruts in the yard leading up to it suggested it was a fairly new arrangement. They hadn't spoken about her ex-husband when she stopped by Dad's, but Sam guessed now that the "ex" part had come more recently than she let on. Sam stepped to the door with the small box of chocolates he'd bought in Oakland City the day before, no doubt a melted mess inside the shrink-wrap. They'd probably be okay after some time in the fridge.

The trailer didn't have a doorbell, so he opened the screen and knocked. Over a steady racket, a voice shouted from the far end of the trailer. He waited several seconds and raised his hand to knock again when the sound stopped and the door opened. A boy with long blonde hair stared at Sam.

"Hi," Sam said, dangling the box of chocolates from his good hand.

"Mom says you can come in." The blond boy ran to the couch, dive-bombing and grabbing a game controller as he landed. He and his brother resumed their game with a roar of machine gun fire. Sam closed the door behind him and stood awkwardly near a bookshelf covered with framed photographs. The trailer smelled of air freshener and fried food.

"What are you guys playing?" Sam asked.

"*Gears of War*," the blonde one said without looking from the screen. Sam could only see it at an angle, but half of the screen seemed covered in blood. The other boy, who had darker hair and looked older, glanced repeatedly at Sam out of the corner of his eye. Sam tried to put his left hand in his pocket, realized the jeans were tighter than the baggy shorts he normally wore, and hooked his thumb through his belt loop instead.

"Looks intense," Sam said. The blonde boy couldn't be much older than Danny, but Sam couldn't imagine Libby letting Danny anywhere near such mayhem.

"I guess," said the blonde boy. "It's the first one. We beat it lots of times." He leaned into an attack, and the explosion rattled the floor. "Mom says we might get the new one for Christmas."

"Cool," Sam said.

“What happened to your hand?” the dark-haired boy asked, still focused on the TV. Sam unhooked his thumb from his belt loop, but didn’t know what to do with his dangling half-hand. If there had been a flowerpot nearby, he would have planted it in the dirt.

“I had an accident.”

The dark-haired boy furrowed his brow, unconvinced.

“That’s what Mom said,” The blonde boy said. “Looks pretty sick.” Another explosion.

“Um—” Sam started. It looked pretty tame compared to the carnage on the screen.

“Turn that racket down,” Julie shouted over the bedlam as she appeared in the hallway. “Right now.” The older boy hit the mute button, and the sounds of battle changed to the click-clicks of the game controllers. Julie looked at Sam from the other side of the boys, smiling. “You clean up pretty good.” Sam could say the same of her. Her hairstyle still screamed nineties, but her smile jolted him. She wore a simple summer dress, much more appropriate to the weather, and almost nonexistent sandals. Some kind of tribal tattoo snaked its way up her right calf.

“You look pretty good yourself,” Sam said, seeing both the thirtysomething mother and the teenager he’d gone to the prom with, as if the two images had been laid over each other. She’d never been beautiful, but she’d been so cute in high school that she sometimes made Sam lightheaded.

The blonde boy made a gagging, “aauuuggghhhh” sound, while the dark-haired one rolled his eyes. “Oh, shut up,” Julie said as she crossed in front of them, careful to

step over the controller cables, and put her hand on the younger one's blonde head. "This little turd's Kyler," she said, roughing his hair.

"We've met," Kyler said, mashing away at the buttons.

"And the moody one over there's Jaden."

"Nice to meet you boys," Sam said. Both mumbled without looking at him, and then Jaden unmuted the TV. The floor rattled as Julie crossed to Sam.

"They take after their dad," Julie said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Get a room," Kyler said.

"We're leaving," Julie said, scooping her massive purse and cigarette wallet from a rocking chair Sam hadn't noticed. "Games off at six. Fold your laundry, run the dishwasher, and then get down to Mamaw and Papaw's." Her mom voice startled Sam. "Love you," she said without looking back.

Before they got to the highway, déjà vu washed over Sam. The way he'd instinctively opened the door of the truck for her, the way she fiddled with her hair, and even the way he scanned the radio incessantly until he found some good rock—they'd done these things in high school. Different truck, older occupants, same routine. As they pulled onto 61, he marveled at how little changed here. He'd driven past these houses on his way to school. The same trees loomed over the same curves in the road. The mines had reopened, the same music clanged from the same fingers on the same piano on Sunday mornings, and he and Dad still muddled through the same silences. He glanced at the mangled left hand pinching the steering wheel. That had changed. But wasn't his hand just the latest in a long string of mining accidents stretching back to his great-great-uncle Revis? Nothing changed here. Not really.



“Mind if I smoke?” Julie said, cracking her window and unsnapping her cigarette wallet.

“Only if you share.”

She lit two cigarettes, taking one from her lips and placing it carefully between his. He tasted her lipstick, faintly medicinal, as he took a long drag. A generic brand, but strong. Julie placed her hand on his over the shifter knob.

“Trippy, huh?” she said, blasting him again with her smile.

“Sure is.” To the right, the sprawling brownish-gray concrete of their high school came into view. Sam hadn’t seen it since he’d been home. “Talk about trippy,” he said, nodding toward the school.

“I guess. I’m out there every other week, explaining to the principal why Jaden’s not a juvenile delinquent.”

Sam tried to imagine returning as a parent but couldn’t. Still, the idea that kids continued to shuffle through the place felt natural. One more constant in a limited universe.

He gripped Julie’s hand for a moment as they approached one of the few stoplights in the county, and then pulled it away. “I’m gonna need that for a sec,” he said, grabbing the shifter.

“Good thing it was the other hand,” Julie said. Sam glanced at her as the truck rolled to a near stop and then accelerated. “Be hard to shift with the other one.”

“That’s true.”

“Bright side to everything.” Her smile sold it. She meant what she said. Always had, as far as he could remember.

“Shit,” he said, looking around. “Missed the turn.”

“That’s okay. Didn’t feel like a movie anyway.”

“What else is there to do around here?” In high school, they’d mostly cruised. Gas had been eighty-nine cents then. Unless they wanted to go eat ice cream at the Dairy Queen, Sam had zero ideas.

“The fair’s this week. Why don’t we drive out and see what’s going on?”

Sam could think of a dozen reasons. He’d roast in these clothes. He didn’t want to deal with people. Heat made his hand hurt. Explaining his injury to people got old fast. The fair smelled like livestock. When he turned to her, she smiled again.

“Sounds good to me,” he said, shifting into third.

The fairgrounds sat on a hill just west of Petersburg. Most of the year its few permanent structures stood empty. Livestock corrals, an exhibition space, a bleached outdoor amphitheater. It butted up against the local park, but saw precious little activity for forty-nine weeks out of the year. In late summer, though, as the nights grew hot and sticky, it bustled with activity. Cows, pigs, horses, and other farm animals made their way to the grounds, their owners hoping to win a blue ribbon. Second-rate carnival companies towed their second-rate rides into town, and grungy men and women in concert T-shirts set them up and operated them. Every club, civic organization, church, and Boy Scout troop opened a booth on the midway, hocking everything from deep-fried Snickers bars to walking tacos, which, if Sam remembered correctly, were just small bags of Fritos filled with taco meat and cheese, served with a spork. Every conceivable 4-H project, from pottery to model rocketry, sat in the long exhibition hall, and the best garnered Grand Champion ribbons. Events cycled through the amphitheater each night,

from the Miss Pike County pageant to whatever local singer had managed to throw a country band together. During his semester of college, Sam had read about the festivals thrown by guilds in medieval England, and that random snippet of memory still reminded him of the county fair. Sweaty excitement for people who normally weren't excitable.

Pulling onto the large grass field used for parking, Sam saw a couple of trucks hauling beat-up cars spray-painted with random words and phrases. "Demo Demon," one of them read. Another had "Kiss My Exhaust" painted across the rear bumper.

"Ooh, we can check out the derby," Julie said as they parked. "I think my cousin's in one of the cars. At least he said he would be if he could get it running."

"Sounds good to me," Sam said, still not sure why he was here.

They walked through the front gate behind an older couple moseying on either side of a little boy, probably their grandson. Sam had forgotten there was no admission to the main drag at the fair, but it made sense. Plenty of money would be spent on tickets for rides and games, and though he didn't know the breakdown, he assumed both the carnies and the county made out okay. The midway didn't have a lot of people on it yet, but the sun still hung high enough to broil the early comers. Sweat pooled at Sam's waist.

"Want to play a game?" Julie said. "There's a couple of booths over there."

"Lead the way."

The marquees above the booths contained the name of the game surrounded by multicolored light bulbs. The three closest read "Pop-a-Shot," "Milk Can Challenge," and "Bullseye!".

"Which one you want to try?" she asked as they stepped onto the grass. All three carnies looked at them with gleaming eyes, as if they were marbled cuts of steak. Two, a

Hispanic man and a black woman, shouted reasons to visit their booths. Other than the two black men at the mine and Guaman, they were the first non-white people he'd seen since leaving Nashville. Sam had no chance at Pop-a-Shot with one good hand. He could throw the ball for the Milk Can Challenge, but knew the game was rigged with weighted cans.

“Let's throw darts.”

“Great choice!” the black woman said to Sam and Julie as they stepped toward her. The other two attendants sat back down on their stools. “Two bucks a dart, or five bucks for four.” Games had gotten expensive. Sam dug out his wallet and paid the woman. She dropped the darts on the ledge in front of them and stepped quickly out of the way.

“Turn about?” Julie asked.

“Works for me. You go first,” Sam said.

Julie's first dart bounced off the board completely, landing on the grass in front of it. The attendant made no move to retrieve it as Sam picked up his darts. He felt off balance with his injury, and when he tried to hold the extra dart between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, it fell into the grass.

“I got that,” Julie said, bending to pick it up.

“No,” Sam said, sharper than he'd intended. “Let me.” He hooked it with his thumb and stood. Julie's smile was gone. “Listen, I didn't mean anything by it. I just don't want help.”

“Sorry. Didn't mean to go all mom on you.”

“You didn’t.” Sam wanted to say more, but the attendant looked on, apparently fascinated. “It was stupid.”

“That’s how things are sometimes. You get used to it.” She turned and threw her second dart, popping a pink balloon. When she looked at Sam, her smile had returned. He threw his two darts and hit a blue balloon with the second one. “You just had to catch up, didn’t you?” she said, putting her arm around his waist, hopefully high enough to avoid his ring of sweat.

“Two balloons,” the carnie said. “Means y’all can pick from this level.” She pointed to a long, hooked pole toward the side of the booth filled with stuffed animals and mirrors in paper frames that held the names of popular bands. Most were too current for Sam to recognize, but some old stand-bys were mixed in. Charlie Daniels Band, Bon Jovi, Led Zeppelin. Sam wondered if the carnival company checked their destinations on the map before choosing which mirrors to bring. “We’re headed to southern Indiana, boys,” the boss probably told the carnies. “Go grab extra boxes of Hank Jr. and Metallica!”

“That little monkey’s awfully cute,” Julie said, pointing at a stuffed animal just above the row of mirrors. It wore a straw hat and aviator-style sunglasses. Its long tail hung to the shelf below it.

“It’s yours,” Sam said. “Can we get the cop-looking monkey?”

“Sure thing,” the attendant said as she crossed to get it, stooping to pick up the fallen dart as she walked.

Monkey in-hand, Sam and Julie ventured onto the midway. The crowd had picked up, and the smell of fried foods hovered around them. Voices barked from other game

stands, assuring fair-goers of a winner. Considering the monkey he carried probably cost ten cents to assemble in China, Sam figured the game company was the only sure winner. Still, it was fun, and Julie liked it. He took her hand in his good one, hoping to erase the tension he'd created earlier. The older couple and their grandson from earlier stood by the entrance to the tilt-a-whirl while the grandfather explained to the boy why he might be too young to ride. "You're gonna toss your cookies, you get on that thing," the old man said in a gravelly voice while his wife nodded her head. The grandson, eight or nine, looked like Christmas had not only been canceled, but shot dead in the street.

They were nearly to the amphitheater entrance when someone shouted their names. "What brings you two out here?" the voice boomed. Sam turned and saw Brick from the machine shop lumbering toward them with a melting ice cream cone in one hand and the fist of a filthy toddler in the other.

"Hey, Potts," Julie said when she saw him. Her hand fell away from Sam's. "They just letting anybody in now?" It took Sam a moment to realize that Brick's last name must be Potts, and another moment to stifle the laugh from realizing his name was Brick Potts.

"If you two are here, I guess so," Brick said with a big smile. He seemed much happier away from work. "How's it going, Hightower?"

"Good. Just heading to the demo derby."

"Us too. Connor here wouldn't miss it."

"They gonna crash," the kid said, looking at Sam as if he'd provided the key to understanding creation.

"How's the hand?" Brick asked.

“Oh, you know. Mostly there.” He’d been working on clever ways to answer the question. “Much lighter” was another he’d considered.

“Glad to hear it. It’s a damn shame, but you’re better off than Jimmy, at least.” Sam hadn’t heard much about the man whose leg was injured the day of his accident, though the image of the blood-spurting leg had stayed with him.

“Yeah?”

“Yup. Thought he might keep the leg, but it went gangrenous on him a couple of weeks ago and they had to take the rest.”

“Hate to hear that,” Julie said, her fingers moving to Sam’s elbow. “Least he’s got worker’s comp.”

“‘Til it runs out, anyway,” Brick said, as Connor started pulling his arm. The thought of the checks drying up made Sam’s stomach twist. He’d need to find work again. He couldn’t work in the machine shop, couldn’t play guitar, and couldn’t do much of anything that took two hands. Could he bag groceries?

“Gotta love non-union mines,” Julie said. “Right, Sam?”

“You know it,” Sam said, vaguely remembering the shirts Dad used to make them wear when the Local 1298 marched in the Labor Day parades in Boonville or Princeton.

“Come on, Dad,” Connor said, tugging again. “We’re gonna miss it.”

“Okay, okay. You’re gonna yank my finger off.” Brick froze and shot a sorry glance at Sam.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sam said, smiling.

Brick nodded and followed his son. “See you two later,” he said, joining the steady flow of people entering the amphitheater grounds.

Sam and Julie joined the line further back than Brick and Connor. The large metal gate restricting entrance to the bleachers had once been white, but dots of rust made it look brownish now. The whole structure stood cockeyed, squeaking as patrons moved through the turnstile. Sam forked over admission and they made their way down the hill into the big grass bowl with bleachers around the top edge. For the beauty pageant, organizers trucked in a stage and dressing rooms, and when they had the demo derby, they simply hosed the bottom of the bowl into a mud pit. Sam vaguely remembered a stink in the *Dispatch* once because they'd scheduled the demo derby for the night before the pageant.

The derby itself was as uneventful as the ones Sam recalled from his childhood. In theory, putting a bunch of old, souped-up cars in a confined muddy space and telling the drivers to run into each other should be endlessly entertaining, but in practice, it was mostly dull. A few good hits came early on, but the mud always bogged the cars down, especially after a collision or two. The judges scored it like boxing by keeping track of hits, but Sam had more fun watching Connor, two rows down, and the other kids. The engine revs and flying mud enthralled them, and on the rare occasion that someone made solid contact, they lost their collective damn minds.

"Guess my cousin's not in it this year," Julie said, reminding Sam that she was beside him. He'd been too busy kid-watching to speak.

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, he always seems to like it." She checked her lipstick in a small mirror. "I think I'd have a headache afterwards."

"Yeah, I never thought it looked all that—"



“Shit,” she said. Sam followed her eyes to the end of the bleachers, but didn’t see anything odd.

“What is it?”

“See that dumbass over there? The one not watching the derby?” Sam looked. Every set of eyes was on the cars except for one. A scruffy, bearded face looked in their direction.

“Who’s that?” Sam asked.

“My ex.”

“Oh.” Sam’s stomach knotted. The man looked big and unhappy. He clearly saw them, and now he saw that they saw him. “Should I be worried?”

“Nah. I don’t think so.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Sam hated confrontations. He’d never confronted Dad about anything. The confrontation with Michelle had lasted all of two minutes. He didn’t even like to tell waiters if they got his order wrong. So by the time the announcer called an end to this year’s demo derby (Lawrence “Hog” Farley and his truck, “Bad Muther Bleep” had won in a landslide), Sam felt queasy. The amphitheater only had one exit, unless you wanted to scramble through unmowed fields or squeeze between utility sheds, neither of which would impress Julie.

“There’s really nothing to worry about,” she said, gripping the bicep of his left arm. Even so high, the grip sent pain through his hand, but he kept quiet.

“So he’s not gonna wait for us on the other side of the gate?”

“He might. But he knows better than to start something here.”

“So he’d like to cave my face in, but he’s got to wait for a better time?” They smooched with the other people exiting toward the suddenly narrow gate. He felt like a bull in the chute at a rodeo, only without the bulk. Or the horns.

“You’re still funny, you know that?” Julie said. He’d made her laugh in high school because jokes had come easier than muscles.

“I’m sure whasisname will think so.”

“Jason,” she said. “His name’s Jason Kirby.” They were nearly through the gate, and Sam held his left hand close to his chest as sweaty bodies pressed against him on either side. “I’m surprised you don’t remember him. He was only two grades ahead of us.” The name sounded familiar, but all the names were familiar here, and Sam hadn’t recognized the face across the bleachers.

“Well, that changes things,” Sam said. “We should buy him a corndog.”

Once through the gate, air worked its way back between their crowded bodies, cool on Sam’s hands and face. The rest of his body still sweltered under the sweat-soaked shirt. He waited for a hand to close on his collar and throw him to the ground, but as the crowd thinned, they walked on.

“See?” Julie said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“If you say so. Where to now?”

“You know where I haven’t been in years?” Her voice grew bright.

“Where’s that?”

“The fire tower.”

Sam chuckled. The fire tower stood in the State Forest between Arthur and Winslow, a ten-minute drive from the highway, and not easy to find if you didn’t know

where to look. Long before Sam had been born, the authorities used it to watch for fires sparked up from the coal trains that rushed past tall grass on their way to the tipple. Rickety stairs zigzagged up the one-hundred-plus feet inside an iron frame, ending in small compartment on top with open-air windows in all four directions. Graffiti covered the inside of the compartment, and its splintery floor had hosted more sex than late-night Cinemax. By the time he got his license, though, the stairs had rotted to the point that people could only get to the top by climbing the iron frame itself, which he'd done on multiple occasions. The teenage sex at that point had been mostly limited to cars parked beneath it, lit only by the moon and lightning bugs.

For Sam and Julie, however, there had been no sex. They'd visited the fire tower once, and they'd talked for hours. Prom night, the small lot filled with tastefully spaced cars. They'd outlasted the rest, until they were the only car there. If ever there had been a time for going all the way, that had been it. Julie had swiped a bottle of wine from her parents' liquor cabinet, but had forgotten a corkscrew. There they had sat, in Granma and Granddad's new Dodge Dynasty, waxed and polished for prom, handing a sealed wine bottle back and forth, talking and flirting and joking and kissing until the sun came up. They'd come close to giving in, but she'd warned him beforehand that the timing was bad. Back then, they had all the time in the world to make up for it, but they'd broken it off soon after in a tearful argument over nothing.

"We could do the fire tower," he said as they walked through the exit gate to the grass parking lot. He felt seventeen again, and damned if the grass didn't smell a little sweeter than it had coming in. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Hey,” Julie blurted, and then her hand, which had been on or around his arm most of the evening, was gone. He turned to see Jason Kirby on the other side of the streaming line of fairgoers, pulling her along. They were outside the main gate now, only fifty yards or so from the truck.

“Julie!” Sam shouted past the moving people. Kirby and Julie weren’t far away, but with the commotion, he couldn’t make out their words, though a “fuck” from Kirby caused some gasps among the crowd. Sam pushed past a few people and stepped close enough to make himself heard. “Come on,” he said. “Don’t do this.”

Kirby looked at Sam for a moment, trying to place him. “Who are you?” he said, but it came out more like “Huryu?”

“This is Sam,” Julie said before Sam could speak. They formed an island in the onrush of people moving toward their cars. “He’s my date.” She shook her arm loose from his grasp and stepped closer to Sam. Sam stepped to her, too. Kirby looked at them as a pair.

“Do I know you?” he asked Sam.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, what are you doing here with my wife, Sam?” Kirby asked, stepping closer and nearly knocking over a middle-aged man who said “Watch it!” but didn’t stop.

“Ex-wife,” Julie said.

“Not until the judge says so,” Kirby shot back. Sam blinked. He was on a date with a married woman. Separated, sure, but still married. His mind went to Jake, and what his preacher brother would think of him right now.

“Hang on,” Sam said, meaning to follow it with “I didn’t know,” but before he could finish, Kirby put his hand on Sam’s chest.

“Butt out,” Kirby said, giving Sam a slight shove. He put his foot back to find balance, but instead of ground, it found someone’s moving foot. Sam’s foot hooked around the person’s leg, and before he could grab for support from Julie or anyone else, he toppled backward, twisting as he fell to keep his leg from pulling out from under him at an awkward angle. Julie shouted. The next thing he knew, he lay across an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair up in a perm. His knee hurt, but his left hand screamed with pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said, trying to pick himself up, but people bumped against him as they tried to get out of the way.

“Can someone help me up?” the woman said, and two men stepped in to do so. One of them tugged Sam roughly off of her and he found himself standing in the middle of a dry patch of dirt worn into the grass by the fair traffic. The stuffed monkey lay next to him, its hat torn and its fur covered in brown dust. People stood around him in a small circle, some speaking to him, others just looking. He didn’t see Julie, but he heard her voice from behind him.

“It’s okay, Sam,” she said, and he felt her arms on his back, then around his waist. “Oh, you’re hurt,” she said, and loosened her grip.

“I’m okay. I just banged my knee.” Someone in the crowd gasped.

“No you’re not,” Julie said. “Your hand.”

Sam looked down and saw that the raisiny scabs on his hand had been torn off, and blood had run up his hand and arm. It dripped in slow, fat blobs onto the dirt, looking

like small pellets of iron. "I'm okay," he said again. "I just need to get a bandage on it." He looked around at the people, but the first person he saw was Jason Kirby.

"You gonna make it, chief?" Kirby asked in a shaky voice. It occurred to Sam that Kirby might not have known about the injury, that he might think he'd knocked most of Sam's hand off by pushing him backward. Sam smiled, which seemed to unnerve Kirby more.

"What do you care?" Sam said. He reached out with his bleeding hand and snagged Kirby by the front of his collar. It hurt like hell. Blood dribbled down the man's shirt and onto his jeans. His face turned white. Sam stared until Kirby looked away, and then he let go, feeling faint himself. "I'll be fine." He didn't enjoy Kirby's horror as much as he'd expected.

"No thanks to you, you fucking asshole," Julie said, shoving Kirby much harder than Kirby had shoved Sam. "Get the fuck out of here before I call the cops." Explaining to the cops how he'd severed a man's fingers by pushing him to the ground seemed too much for Jason Kirby, because he melted into the crowd and disappeared. No final words to Julie or Sam, just gone. Julie knew how to pick 'em. "Does anybody have anything we can use for a bandage?" Julie asked the crowd, which looked as confused as Kirby had. "Anything. Band-Aids, towels, whatever." Sam held his hand out from his chest, trying to keep the blood off his clothes, though Dad's shirt was already ruined. The pain faded.

"Here," a man said, stepping forward with a wad of brown paper napkins. A boy and a girl stood behind him, ice-cream cones uneaten and melting over their fingers.

"That'll do," Julie said, snatching them away. She grabbed Sam's left hand by the wrist and pushed the napkins hard against it, sending a new burst of pain up his arm.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” he said, snatching them away. “I’m not gonna bleed to death.”

That seemed to be enough for the crowd, which began to disperse. The man with the napkins asked if they wanted him to get a sheriff’s deputy. “Why? Somebody breaking the law?” Sam wanted Julie to see he was fine. The man looked at him and then turned back to his kids and their sticky hands.

“Dammit, Joey,” he said. “Go get some more napkins.”

Julie took his right arm and started walking toward the truck. “You really okay?” she asked, looking hard into his eyes.

“I really am. It’s nothing.”

“I’m so, so sorry.” The husk in her voice made Sam afraid she would cry.

“I’d say you’re pretty lucky to have two guys fighting over you.”

“You’re a piece of work.” They stopped at the truck, and Sam fished the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Julie.

“I know,” he said. “But this piece of work is gonna need you to drive him home.”

She drove south on the highway, alternately cursing Jason Kirby and apologizing for him. “He’s not usually like that,” she said a few times. Sam tried to explain that he hadn’t fallen because of Kirby, but simply tripped. Julie wasn’t convinced. “Don’t make excuses for that dipshit,” she said. When they passed her road in Campbelltown, Sam asked where she was going. “You can’t drive yourself home yet,” she said. It wasn’t until she pulled into the liquor store just over the river south of Winslow that he realized she wasn’t taking him home. “I’ll be right back,” she said, hopping out of the truck. Sam watched her go, flexing the muscles in his left hand gently. It hurt, but not bad, and the bleeding had mostly stopped. He needed some peroxide and a bandage.

“What’s in the bag,” he asked when she got in the truck with a paper grocery sack.

“A case of Natty Light.”

“God, I hope not.”

When she took the left onto the State Forest Road, Sam wasn’t surprised. Julie had grown from the high school girl with wants she couldn’t express into a divorced mother of two with plans for Sam whether he liked it or not. He admired it, but would rather have gone home, bandaged his hand, and slept off his embarrassment. The faces in the crowd, leering with shock and disgust at his dripping hand, wondering where his fingers had gone. Lifting their shoes to look for them, as if they’d stuck to the bottom of someone’s Nikes like dogshit.

The State Forest Road ran far into the Pike State Forest, mostly straight, but with narrow shoulders and steep hills like a roller coaster. Even in the early dark, Julie seemed bent on taking advantage of it. She pressed the accelerator as they climbed the first hill, rewarding them with a brief feeling of near-weightlessness as the road dropped beneath them. Sam’s stomach fell into his underwear.

“Got that one pretty good,” she said as she revved for the next hill.

“I’d say.”

“You okay over there?”

“Never better.”

“Good. Hang on.”

They popped another hill, and this time the back end of the truck felt like it bounced up off the pavement as they dropped back down. Sam considered pointing out



she drove his truck, but she drove it well, so he stayed quiet. His pulse quickened, thrumming in his hand, and he pulled his seat belt snug against his chest as she barreled up the next hill.

“Go for it,” he said.

By the time they pulled into the dimly lit fire tower lot, the truck cab’s contents had been scattered across the floorboard. Every joint in Sam’s body had locked, but he smiled, and his cheeks ached from laughing. When had that last happened? One other car sat at the far end of the long, skinny lot, probably containing two kids freaking out at the sight of headlights, but the windows were much too steamy for spying.

“Well, here we are,” Sam said, turning to face her and clicking the keys to the accessory position. Clapton played on the local rock station. “Have your way with me.”

“Isn’t that my line?” She laughed again.

“You’re so old-fashioned. What’s in the bag?”

“Well, let’s see,” she said, lifting it from the console between them. She reached in and jumbled things around. “A bottle of water and napkins,” she said, laying the two items on her lap, “for cleaning up your hand.” Sam held his hand up in the faint moonlight. Too dark to see, but it felt dry, so he wadded up the ice cream napkins, feeling a few shreds tear and stick to his hand. He tossed the remaining wad in the floorboard.

“Good idea. What else?”

“Lookie here,” she said, pulling out a long bottle and handing it to Sam.

“Somebody put a bottle of wine in here.” Sam held it out in front of him, trying to make out the label, but only seeing that it was red.

“Please tell me you remembered—”

“A corkscrew!” she shouted, pulling a cheap plastic one out of the bag as if it were a rabbit from a top hat. She laughed hard, and so did Sam, remembering how they had scratched and clawed at the wine on prom night, sure they could get the cork out, but failing completely.

“Now we’re all set.” Clapton transitioned to a Cinderella power ballad. Somebody at the radio station knew what was going on. Not that it took ESP in southern Indiana on a Friday night.

“Should we get in the back?” she asked.

“If you want to roll around on a dirty truck bed. I don’t have a blanket.”

“That’s okay.” She looked around. “It’s a big cab.”

“I’m flattered,” he said. “So should I get you drunk first?”

“Let’s save that ‘til after.” She crawled into the passenger seat on top of him.

“You’re still married.”

“Don’t think of this as starting anything. Think of it as finishing something.”

Then her hands were on him.

The truck cab wasn’t that big. They got just enough clothing off to do the deed, and Julie kept banging her head against the ceiling of the cab. “I’m okay,” she kept saying. “Don’t stop.” He didn’t. He buried his face in her chest, and the front of her dress kept slipping over the back of his head. She smelled of strong perfume, and a few times he thought he might pass out from lack of oxygen. Her right leg slipped off the seat once, and he heard her knee hit the console hard. “Ow, shit,” she said, and he tried to stop to see if she was okay, but she grabbed his arms and pulled herself down onto him harder. Their sweat made them slick against each other, and the windows of the truck steamed

and then condensed until streams of water ran down them. The moonlight cast jellied patterns on the seats and their skin as the wine bottle clanked to the floorboard. He tried to put his hands on her hips, but could only grip with his right one, which felt lopsided. They went on a long time, and eventually Sam's mind quieted enough to enjoy himself.

After, they held each other briefly, and then she dumped herself sideways into the driver's seat. Her legs, with her pale underwear around the ankles, lay on Sam's lap. The cab felt like a greenhouse. Water slid down the windows and dashboard.

"Hot in here," she said.

"Yeah, we should probably roll down a window." Neither of them moved. The moon had risen higher, filling the cab with silver light. The watery windows made it feel psychedelic. "Did you have your appendix out?" He pointed toward a scar on the lower right of her belly. He didn't remember it from high school. She laughed.

"Nope. Had two babies out, though."

"Oh." Sam felt his cheeks flush. "Sorry."

"I'm not." She laughed again. "Most days." Sam smiled as he wiped his forehead. "What about you? You've got a scar there, if I remember right." She did remember right, but Sam had lied to her in high school. "Bike wreck, right?"

"Not really," he said. "That's what I told you, though."

She sat up, putting her elbows on the driver's armrest. "So what happened?" She seemed curious, not hurt. As if she expected Sam to have lied to her.

"I had a biopsy. To donate a kidney." He resisted saying the next part. "For my little brother."

"I didn't know you had a little brother."

“I don’t. Not anymore.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Did something go wrong with the kidney?”

“It never happened.” He wanted to tell her the rest. “He got too sick,” he said instead.

“That’s awful.” She put her hand on his arm and they sat like that for a while. Eventually, she flipped forward and fished in the driver’s floorboard, coming up with the bottle of wine. “What do you say we move this party to the back?”

The rush of cool air as Sam stepped out of the truck felt glorious—sharp and light, carrying the fragrance of the woods. Cicadas and frogs chirped so loudly he had to raise his voice to be heard.

“Looks like our friends are gone.” He pointed to where the other car had been.

“I’d hope so. It’s gotta be past three.”

“Don’t you need to get home to your boys?” He stepped into the bed of the truck from the back bumper, reaching to help Julie in.

“Nah. They’re staying with my folks tonight.” She planted herself on a wheel well and took out her cigarettes, again lighting two and handing one to Sam. “Knowing my mom, they’re probably passed out from a junk food overdose.” Sam took a drag from the cigarette then sat across from her on the other wheel well.

“A pretty good arrangement.”

“Sometimes.” She flicked an ash in the bed. “Sometimes not.”

“Well, I guess we should open that wine,” he said, feeling he should change the subject. “What’ve you got there?”

She laughed. “How the hell should I know? It’s wet, and it’s red.”

“Good enough for me. You do the honors.”

While she pulled the cork, Sam opened the rear window. Slow electric guitar floated out in E-minor. As he sat back down, the cork came out with a pop, splashing wine on the truck bed.

“Shit,” she said.

“Yeah, it’ll probably stain.” They laughed again, and then settled back to wait for the first chirp of morning birds.

## Chapter Nine

When the doorbell woke Sam, the square of light on the bedroom wall was further across the room than he'd expected. It couldn't be afternoon already. The doorbell rang again, and he rolled from the bed to the floor, landing in laundry. By the time he pulled on some clothes and ambled up the stairs, the doorbell had begun ringing out "Shave and a Haircut." Only one person would resort to that.

"Hi Jake," Sam said, opening the door.

"Hi yourself. I wondered if you were here. Where's your truck?" Jake stepped into the kitchen with a travel mug of coffee from the gas station. Had Julie been working? Doubtful.

"At a friend's house."

"Uh huh. Well, get dressed. I'm headed to Evansville to pick up the new Sunday School materials, and you can keep me company."

"I'm kind of tired." The bright kitchen hurt Sam's eyes.

"Sleep when you're dead, brother."

Sam had woken earlier with a wine headache. It had passed, though, and he'd avoided Jake enough that bailing now would get uncomfortable.

“Okay,” Sam said, “but lunch is on you.”

“Says the moneybags.”

Sam slipped his feet into his flip-flops, running his hand through his tangled hair. If Jake wanted to drag him to Evansville, then Jake would have to deal with the looks he got for traveling with a vagrant.

The drive from Arthur to Evansville had changed a few times in Sam’s life. When he was young, the only way south was on state roads, and he had vague memories of passing the Evansville airport with Mom on their way to buy school clothes or on trips to the doctor with Danny. Sometime in middle school, Interstate 164 had been built as a southbound spur off of I-64, which ran across southern Indiana on its path from the Virginia coast to St. Louis. I-164 only ran about twenty miles south from 64, around the east side of Evansville to the Ohio River, where it hit the twin bridges into Henderson, Kentucky and turned into U.S. 41 South. Now Jake took an unexpected right turn and soon they drove on a fresh four-lane highway with packed dirt around it for yards in every direction.

“What’s this?” Sam asked.

“Wave of the future,” Jake said, and then, seeing Sam’s confusion, “Interstate 69. Hooks up with 164, and it’s gonna run all the way to Indy in a few years. Michigan to Texas when it’s done.” The swath of light brown dirt around the new highway rose and fell, packed hard by heavy machinery. On the left, an old white church stood empty, its driveway dead-ending in the dirt.

“Didn’t there used to be another road here?”

“Nothing gets by you,” Jake said. “Old Highway 57. You can still see some of it over through those trees. Basically a glorified driveway now. Over here,” he gestured toward the church, “they tore it up to make room for the interstate.” The church had some mud spatters around its foundation and a dull brownness all over.

“What happens to that church?”

“Not sure. State’s been giving out some money to move houses and whatnot. They moved a church up by Petersburg a while back. Petersburg’s got an exit now. Be good for the local economy, they say.”

“What about the local people?” This church didn’t look very movable, with its leaning bell tower and worn wood.

“It’s caused concern for some families, no doubt,” Jake said. “The Epleys over in Alford had to watch their house get dozed over.” He looked out the window at the church as it disappeared behind them. “But they got paid for it.” That seemed to be enough for Jake, but would he feel the same watching his own house tilled under like a fallow field? “So why are you so tired?”

“I had a date last night, if you’ve got to know.” Dad had probably told him by now anyway.

“Julie Granderson?” Of course he knew.

“Dad tell you?”

“Nope. Julie did. More or less.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I stopped for coffee at the junction. She was working. Told me to tell you to get some rest. Don’t got to be Columbo to figure the rest out.” It should have annoyed Sam,



but he was mostly just impressed by Julie's work ethic, taking a morning shift after sitting at the fire tower until sunrise.

"Anything else I need to know about my comings and goings?" Sam asked as the long flat lines of the interstate slipped by on his right.

"Just that you oughta think twice before fighting with one hand."

"Jesus, people like to talk around here."

"True, but Jesus hasn't got much to do with it." Sam ignored the scolding. "Did you have a good time?"

Sam thought of the watery truck windows and the wedding band Julie didn't wear. "Surely somebody's already told you the answer to that." For a while, Jake was quiet.

The Christian bookstore in Evansville stood on one of the new side roads of the booming east side of town. When Sam had driven up from Nashville, he'd seen some of the lights in the distance, but daylight showed more of the recent development. Two or three miles of it had been corn and soybeans ten years ago. Strip malls and box stores stood everywhere now. Lots of urban sprawl, with roads twisting around ditches and fields that still hadn't been bought or paved. The bookstore and its parking lot sat alone in one of these fields, built far enough out of town to appeal to older folks from the surrounding rural counties who avoided city driving. The storefront looked exactly like a Barnes & Noble, but the giant letters across the front of the building read "Alpha to Omega" and then smaller, beneath, "Christian Books, Music, and Café." It took Sam a second to get the store name, with its Revelation-based play on "A to Z." It sounded more like frantic walkie-talkie speak from the Cold War.

“Alpha to Omega! Come in, Omega!” he shout-whispered to Jake as they walked through the door.

“Shut up,” Jake said.

“Welcome to the store,” a Birkenstock-wearing kid said as they entered. He wore a cross necklace fashioned out of leather and nails. “Hope you’re having a blessed day!”

“Too blessed to be stressed,” Jake said, and Sam wondered if it was a secret code for entry, like the episode of *Star Trek* where the inmate of the asylum desperately tried to figure out the response to Scotty’s challenge of “Queen to queen’s level three.” Sam hadn’t worn any of his mildly offensive band T-shirts, but still wondered if the kid would have sounded the alarm if he’d responded “Jury’s still out.”

The interior held two open levels covered with neutral colors. Soft fluorescent lights hung over aisle after aisle of books on the ground floor, while a large sign announced a music section upstairs. The smell of fresh coffee drifted from nearby. At the end of several aisles stood spinning stands covered with assorted trinkets. One held plush vegetables with faces and the next held book lights with inspirational Bible verses printed on them. On another hung more of the necklaces the young kid wore. Three weathered nails, bent together to form a rough cross hanging on a leather strap. Others looked more like the ornate crucifixes worn by Ozzy Osbourne. Of course, Ozzy was a family man these days, so maybe he had a sponsorship deal with the place.

“You can look around while I pick up the supplies,” Jake said, heading toward the front counter.

“Great. I’ll just mosey over and scope out the holy water selection.” Sam looked around at the vaguely spiritual merchandise. Deep down, he supposed he believed some

of what he'd been taught growing up in church, but that had been a barebones service, with the same old hymns, the same out-of-tune piano, and a book that hadn't changed much in two-thousand years. This place was a different beast, willing to slap a price tag on every bit of Jesus they could find. The idea of marketing replica crucifixion nails seemed a harsh opposite of the faith he learned as a boy. And the more he looked at the vegetable people, the more they seemed to look back.

Eventually, he found himself on the second floor, scoping out the music. He didn't recognize much of it, though he knew some bands and labels from their presence in Nashville over the years. A few of the country artists he'd worked with had albums in these racks, and Sam knew most of them were there because throwing a gospel album into the mix was good marketing. Even Elvis had known the wisdom of that. If he looked around long enough, he'd probably find something he'd played on. He'd often gotten called in to the studio after a band had blown town to fix a guitar line that needed punched up or doubling one to fill out the sound. Once in a while, he'd even been asked to play a line the original guitarist didn't have the chops for, but he never got his name in the liner notes for that.

On the way back to the first floor, Sam walked by the devotional section, full of books that largely read and interpreted the Bible for you. Sam had gotten a couple for his high school graduation. The titles ran the gamut. "Around the Scripture in 365 Days," the brightest one read. Below these, a shelf of study guides focused on particular books and chapters of the Bible. One promised an exposition of Hebrews, while another was simply called "Comparing the Gospels." Next to it, a thin paperback held the title "Jacob Have I Loved, But Esau Have I Hated." Sam looked at it. No subtitle, no explanation of what the

book would argue. He picked it up to see the back cover, but Jake came around the corner carrying a box before he could read anything.

“Get what you came for?” Sam said, turning away from the bookshelf.

“Finally. I thought I’d have to get un-Christian on that clerk.” Jake looked at the book in Sam’s hands. “Jacob and Esau, huh? Trying to tell me something?”

“Always,” Sam said. “Ready to go?”

“Thought you wanted lunch.”

“I know the whole thing about living on the word of God,” Sam said, “but I’d rather have a sandwich.”

“You’re in luck. They’ve got a mean Panini here.”

“At the Christian book store.”

“Ye of little faith.”

Sam hated when Jake was right, but he couldn’t argue about the Panini. Diving into the second half of his, he looked around the small café. Behind Jake, two shaggy men debated theology, Calvinism, and something about Armenia. At another table, a woman talked loudly on her cell phone about why she wasn’t paying for plumbing work. Behind her, Sam noticed an elderly woman sitting with a steaming cup of coffee, reading her Bible. No flashy cover like the ones on the shelves nearby (“Teen Life Bible!” “Extreme Christian Bible!” “Full Armor Edition!”), just worn black leather with faded gilding on the pages. Sam wondered what brought her to the land of Jesus jewelry.

“How’s the hand?” Jake asked.

“The same as it’s been the other thousand times people have asked.”

“None of those people told me your answer.”

“Okay.” Sam swallowed and took a breath. “It’s healing up fine. Or as fine as it’s gonna get. Tore some scabs off last night. No harm, no foul.”

“Julie sounded worried this morning,” Jake said, taking a drink of coffee. Sam wondered how much coffee Jake drank in a day, and whether it could be measured in gallons.

“That’s nice of her.” Sam chewed his sandwich.

“So free will’s just an illusion?” one of the men behind Jake said loudly to his companion. “Then why are we responsible for anything?” Sam wanted to hear the answer, but Jake spoke first.

“Come on. What happened last night? Inquiring minds.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Do I need a reason? Just want to know what’s up with my little brother and his exciting night life.” He smiled as he brought the mug to his lips again.

“You want to know if we had sex?” The voice of Mr. Free Will faltered a bit behind Jake.

“Good grief,” Jake said, glancing around at the other café patrons. “You think I care about that? You’re a grownup. I hear enough about who’s fooling around with who from high school students.”

“Don’t you spend every Sunday morning telling grownups what to do?”

“If that’s what you saw, then you need to come back and look again.”

“So if I tell you that Julie and I screwed ‘til sunrise, you wouldn’t tell me that was wrong?” Sam wanted to pin Jake like a wrestler. Jake looked at Sam. The first real eye contact they’d made all day.

“Two things,” Jake said. “First, I was your brother before I was ever a preacher. Sometimes I’m just asking the questions a brother should ask.” Sam opened his mouth, but Jake continued. “Second, preachers don’t judge, or at least good ones don’t. They point things out sometimes, give advice. ‘Suggest, don’t push,’ they say.”

“I don’t remember you suggesting much before I left for Nashville,” Sam said. “‘That music’s offensive,’ or ‘You can’t wear that in public,’ or, what was it you used to say? ‘Would you do that if Jesus was standing right here?’ That’s not pushing?” He’d thought more about this in the last fifteen years than he had Julie Granderson.

“Hell yes, I pushed,” Jake said, and Sam cocked his head at the profanity. “But I was eighteen or nineteen. Fresh into the ministry.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Sam said, loud enough to get a worried glance from the kid working the café counter. “You’ve been pushy since we were kids. Pretentious as hell about it, too. Don’t you remember—” He stopped.

“Remember what?” The espresso machine hissed.

“Nothing.”

“Oh, no. If you’re gonna start that sentence, you get to finish it.” It sounded like something he’d say to a student.

“Screw you.”

“Say it!” Jake slapped the table hard and people whispered behind Sam. The kid at the counter looked ill. “What could I have pushed you on that you remember thirty years later? I really don’t know.” He almost whispered. “Enlighten me.”

“Fine. You didn’t push. You judged.” Sam flexed his phantom fingers. It felt good. “You judged me for backing out.”

“Backing out?” Jake looked confused for a moment before realization washed over his face. “Oh.” They sat in silence as the debaters rose and walked away.

“Forget about it,” Sam said.

“Not likely.”

“Really. I’m the bad brother. You’re the good one.”

“Now *that’s* bullshit.” Sam had never heard Jake say the word before.

“But it’s not. You wanted to give him your kidney.” Sam’s voice rose. “You tried to. You’ve got the same scar I do.” He put his hand to his side. “But he needed mine.”

“He did.” Jake sipped his coffee. “I got mad at a lot of things after that, including you. But it wasn’t your fault.”

Sam had been so afraid of having something taken out of his body. Seven years old. He’d told Mom about his fear, and they’d delayed the procedure. Danny had died before Sam found any courage. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Jake stared at something behind Sam for a long time before he spoke again.

“Jacob and Esau,” he finally said without looking back to Sam.

“What?”

“The book you were holding. The one about the good brother and the bad brother. That’s how you see us.”

“I’m done with my sandwich. Can we go?”

“You need to read your Bible more.”

“There’s the Jake I know.”

“Esau was the older brother.”

“Here we go.”

“My name’s Jacob. So what? I’m older, Jacob was younger. For every part of the story that fits me, there’s a part that fits you, too. But we’re not them. I’m no better than you.”

“Glad you could make it down to my level.”

“That’s not what I mean. Listen, you and Julie slept together last night. I know that. I could tell from talking to her this morning, and if not, I’d sure know it from the way you’re fighting me about it. And if you want my professional opinion, I’d tell you it was a mistake.”

“Because she’s still married,” Sam said. Jake pursed his lips.

“I didn’t know that,” he said. “But partially, yes. More, though, because she’s not married to you. That’s what that book over there tells me.” He glanced again at the old woman’s Bible. Sam wondered if she planned to read the whole thing today. “But that book also tells me that we all screw up. Every day.”

“Even preachers?” He’d meant to break the tension, but the look on Jake’s face said that he took it otherwise.

“Especially preachers.” Jake took a deep breath and tapped his fingers on the edge of his Panini plate. He looked around the room, longest at the old woman, and then leaned in toward Sam. “Now, not a word of this to anybody, okay? Even Dad.”

“Okay.” Jake’s hushed tone unnerved Sam.

“Remember when Libby and I split up, toward the end of college?”

“Not really.” He’d been in Nashville by then.



“Well, we did. I’d been preaching around at revivals for a few years, and had been teaching high school for two. I’d been thinking more and more about this stuff—patience, not judging, the whole shebang—partly because I thought I’d run you off.”

“I ran off pretty well by myself.”

“I know that now. Remember the part where I figure stuff out slow?”

“Okay.” Sam looked down at an unfinished corner of his sandwich.

“Anyway, the more I mellowed, the more Libby went in the other direction. She started telling me I should preach more hellfire and brimstone, that I shouldn’t look the other way when somebody in the church did something they shouldn’t. And she wasn’t wrong, exactly. That stuff’s in there, too, but I’d had enough. We didn’t see each other for a summer. ‘Measure twice, cut once,’ I’d told her at the time.” Sam smiled at some of Dad’s favorite words applied to Jake and Libby. “I know,” Jake said. “Dumb, right? All I can say is we all tend to figure things out too slowly.” He leaned forward and glanced around again. “So there was a girl who’d been a senior the first year I taught, in my American History class. We’d always gotten along well. She went off to college—Purdue, I think—and I didn’t see her for over a year. Heard a few times that she was doing well, but mostly forgot about her and went back to teaching Lincoln-Douglas and The New Deal.” He took a last, long swig of his coffee, then wiped his lips with a napkin. Sam thought his hands might be shaking a bit.

“It’s late summer, Lib and I are still split up, and one afternoon there’s a knock on my apartment door. It’s this girl—taller, skinnier, with gorgeous red hair down to her,” he gestured toward his chest, “well, down to here.” Sam nodded. “‘Hi, Mister Hightower,’ she says. ‘Remember me?’ Course I did, and we sat on the front step of the apartment and

talked for a while. She was getting good grades, but wasn't sure about her major. She'd joined a sorority, but didn't much care for it, and a parade of college boys had convinced her they were all creeps. She got up to leave, and I thought that'd be the end of it. She turned, though, and asked me if I'd seen the commercials for a new Civil War movie. She remembered how much time I spent on the Civil War in class, I guess."

"You're kind of a nut about it," Sam said, trying to lighten the mood. He suspected where this was going, even if he couldn't believe it.

"Guilty," Jake said. "So we went to the movie. I convinced myself I was going in teacher mode, with a motivated student, but that was crap, of course. I knew it then. I drove. The movie was mediocre, and we ended up sitting in the dark end of my apartment parking lot." He tapped his fingers on his plate, as if telegraphing what he couldn't say. The espresso machine hissed again. He took a deep breath. "And after, I told her it couldn't happen again. For lots of reasons. I even tried to pray with her, but that's what finally drove her away. I sat there for a long time, thinking I should cry, but I didn't. I just felt like a creep. She'd been my student. But she was beautiful. Sitting there, I finally understood David and Bathsheba." The arguing men had disappeared while Jake had been talking, and the cell phone lady was long gone. "And maybe now you understand Jacob and Esau. We're all both of them." Jake looked less emotional than tired. "You're only the second person I've ever told that to," he finally said, bouncing his pointed finger from the tabletop to make the point clear.

"Did you see her again?"

“Nope. Probably for the best. I’m sure I scared her off, and really, I don’t want to see her again. Kind of like you and the sheet metal cutter, I’d guess,” he said, gesturing toward Sam’s hand.

“You told Libby.”

“I did. The next day.”

“How’d that go?”

“I know Libby’s hard to take. She’s hard for me to take sometimes. But it broke her heart. She took me back, which was more than I deserved. Now I think it was just a reflex, like pulling your car into the garage when it clouds up.” He’d been hunched over the table during the story, but now he sat back in his chair and spoke less softly. “Either way, I’ve learned not to judge.”

“Even if they deserve it?”

“We all deserve it,” Jake said. “But when it comes to Danny, you don’t deserve any more than I do. I try to help people because I couldn’t help him. You draw back from people because you know how much it hurts when you’re too close. We’ve both got crosses to bear.”

They talked about mostly inconsequential things on the drive back home. The interstate would be finished in five years if the hippies up in Bloomington finally gave in, but they’d been saying that for ten. The crops had started to turn brown from lack of rain, but the weatherman had forecast storms soon. Jake and Libby couldn’t decide if Danny was ready for day camp at the park in Petersburg. Sam nodded from time to time, and even offered some questions, but mostly he tried to see Jake through this new lens. He’d exposed himself in an attempt to make Sam feel better, and the accusations of judgment

felt too simple now. Yet, Jake's answers felt too pat. Everyone's Jacob *and* Esau? It felt awfully new agey for a Baptist preacher.

"Can you run me by Julie's to pick up my truck?" Sam asked after Jake had summarized local opinion on the use of pitching machines in Winslow Little League.

"No can do, brother. I've got to meet Mary Lou Quick at the church in twenty minutes to get this literature sorted and labeled. And you know what Mary Lou thinks of late folks." Sam didn't, but they'd just passed the Oakland City IGA, which meant he was cutting it close.

"Can you drop me at the Trading Post, then?" That's where Dad spent most of his off-work time these days, and Sam could probably talk him into a quick ride to Campbelltown without explanation.

"That's an affirmative."

"You're such a dork."

The Trading Post stood just off the highway between Arthur and Winslow on a long patch of ground that had grown yellow-brown in the summer heat. Its newness stood out among the old, sagging houses that dotted the area, because it had been rebuilt. The original store had been a half-mile closer to Arthur and just as dilapidated as everything else, its floorboards stained with tobacco and its bare wood rafters full of wasp nests. In those days, it had been a hardware store, with row after dingy row of pipes and electrical fixtures. A soda machine dispensed glass bottles of Orange Crush, which Sam always talked Dad into buying when he tagged along. There had been a small candy stand, too, with Zagnuts, Snickers, and assorted salty snacks. The old Trading Post had burned

shortly after Sam left for Nashville, but the owner had kept good insurance, which resulted in the steel building Jake pulled up to now.

The front of the store probably ran five hundred feet end-to-end, fronted by a rough gravel parking lot full of dirty pickups and a few sedans. Dad's truck must have been among them.

"Catch you on the flipside," Jake said as Sam shut the door. The truck tore out of the lot, spitting gravel onto the long sidewalk.

The day had grown hot, and the dust kicked up by Jake's tires caught in Sam's throat. He coughed and looked at the building. He'd seen it a couple of times over the years, but hadn't been inside. Large garage doors dominated one end, and the other housed two glass entrance doors. No visible windows, because windows cost money.

The entrance doors were plastered with flyers and other papers. A frog-gigging contest at one of the local strip pits. A call for those interested in joining the South Patoka Volunteer Fire Department. Quilts for sale. Some looked professional, others were hand-scrawled. One was mimeographed, which Sam hadn't seen since elementary school. Stepping through the doors, the thick smoke almost drove him back out. Smoke in Nashville bars had been an invisible and minor irritant before being banned entirely a couple of years ago, and Sam had inhaled his share of secondhand smoke while playing in them. Here, though, the smoke had presence, hanging up near the ceiling, swished around by fans. Not just cigarettes, either. Strong cigars mixed with the sweetness of pipe smoke. And menthols. Rural women loved menthols. As he struggled to breathe, he looked around the long, bright room. He stood next to an unmanned counter with candy bars, gum, and a cash register. Just across from him stood a wall with a large countered

opening, through which a couple of women worked in a kitchen. A tray of food sat on the counter, ready for pick-up by a waitress Sam didn't see. The bulk of the room housed long folding tables, end-to-end, with disposable plastic tablecloths over them. People sat in clusters. A few looked up as Sam entered, but most didn't. Past the tables stood several rows of hardware supplies. It made Sam happy that they had survived the restaurant transition. At the far end of the room were two more double doors, wooden and closed, with the word "GARAGE" stenciled on one. A restaurant, a hardware store, and a garage, all under one roof. Hoosier efficiency at its finest.

"Can I help you, son?" Sam heard the voice and turned to see a deeply tanned woman, somewhere between forty and seventy, standing at the cash register. She held a memo pad, probably the hostess and waitress rolled into one. For all he knew, she'd just come from cooking in the kitchen.

"Is Jesse Hightower around?" Sam asked, looking back over the tables and not seeing Dad's ballcapped head anywhere.

"What do you want that old bag of bones for?" she said with feigned disgust.

"He's my dad," Sam said, knowing he should toss a joke back her way, but not coming up with one. The woman looked Sam over then, paying special attention to his hand.

"You'd be Sam. Glad to finally meet you. Or meet you again, I guess. You played little league with my boy. Tom Gryder?" Sam remembered the name, but not the face.

"Sure. I remember Tom. How is he?"

"In jail over at Jasper right now. Couldn't keep his hands out of the till at Long John Silver's."

“Oh.” Restaurant work ran in the family.

“Anyway, I’m Deb.” Her graying ponytail flapped a bit as she reached across the counter to shake Sam’s hand. “Deb Young, these days.”

“Nice to meet you. Has Dad already been here?”

“Nope.” She chomped on a piece of gum. “He don’t usually come in before noon on Saturdays. Says he’s too busy in the mornings to gossip. I think he just started sleeping in.” Sam considered telling Deb how impossible that was.

“What time is it now?” Deb pointed at the mirrored Jeff Gordon clock on the wall behind her. Twelve-thirty. “I guess I can wait for him.”

“Sure thing, hon. Want a menu?”

“Why not.” The Panini Jake bought him had faded, and beneath the heavy tobacco smoke, Sam could smell good fried things.

“Right this way.” Deb grabbed a paper menu and slipped from behind the counter.

She seated him at the far end of the room at an empty table. A thrum of conversation filled the room, bouncing down from the metal ceiling. He looked over the menu—three pages stapled together at the top left corner. There were stains across the front of the menu, greasy to the touch. The most expensive item cost four dollars. A breaded pork tenderloin sandwich. Toppings were extra. Sam ordered one with cheese and mayo when Deb came back, but before she returned with it, Sam felt a hand on his shoulder.

“How you doing, Sam?” Roger Pirkle. Sam stood to face him, almost coughing as he got another lungful of smoke. He looked paler to Sam, even in the unrelenting August heat, and weary to the bone. A Camel hung from his lips, smoked nearly to the butt.

“Hanging in there,” Sam said.

“That’s good. And the hand?” He pulled a metal folding chair out from the table and sat, not waiting for an invitation.

“Healing. Sam also sat. Deb arrived with Sam’s food and sat it on the table between them.

“Roger, you got nothing better to do than bother this young man?” she said, sitting a glass of sweet tea Sam hadn’t ordered next to his plate.

“I got tons to do,” Roger said, “but none of it better.” Deb grinned and slipped away. Sam looked at his lunch. The plate spanned probably ten inches, but the tenderloin hung over at least an inch all around. A tiny bun sat in the middle like a desert island in a brown, crunchy sea.

“Deb’s a firecracker,” Roger said.

“Seems to be. How are things out at the mine?” He didn’t care, but hated lulls in conversation.

“Oh, we’re getting by. Moved Brick from the shop to the face this week. Said he wanted a change.” The change Brick probably wanted was the ten extra dollars an hour for going underground. “And your dad’s still kicking my goads.” Sam wasn’t sure what that meant, but it seemed good-natured.

“Glad to hear it.” Sam took a large bite out of one edge of the tenderloin. Greasy perfection.

“I’ve been meaning to stop by and talk to you.” Roger took his glasses off to clean them. “Looked for your truck this morning at Jesse’s, but didn’t see it.”

“I was in Evansville.”



“Everybody’s in Evansville these days. Or Jasper. Nowhere to go around here anymore.” He put his glasses back on and adjusted them on the bridge of his long nose. Sam tried not to look at the coal tattoos on his cheek. “You been getting your checks?”

“I have.” He took another bite. “I appreciate them.” He didn’t add that he’d skipped most of his doctor’s appointments and physical therapy so he could stick the money in the bank. He could move his index finger just fine, and the others were too stubby to worry about. An improved range of motion in a finger less than a half-an-inch long wasn’t high on Sam’s priority list. Two tables over, someone must have told a good joke, because the whole room burst into laughter.

“That’s good,” Roger said over the noise. “But we need to have a serious conversation about them.” What was it with serious conversations today? Sam knew where this one went.

“How much longer?”

“What’s that?” Roger blinked a couple of times and reached for his glasses again.

“How much longer will the checks be coming?”

“A while yet,” Roger said, pausing as if calculating complex equations. Sam knew what he was going to say before he said it, thinking of his conversation with Julie and Brick the night before. “Another month at least.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Sam felt angry, but it wasn’t Roger writing the checks. Black Stallion Mining, Inc. called those shots. Sam didn’t even know where they were based. He’d have to remember to check the return address on his next check.

“I wish it was longer,” Roger said, clearly sincere. “Truly. But that’s why I wanted to talk to you. You can wait for your checks to run out, but you’re still an able-

bodied fella. Not like Jimmy, God bless him.” Sam thought again of Brick saying that Jimmy’s leg had gone gangrenous. The word gave him the willies.

“I can’t work in the machine shop anymore.”

“No, but a loader only takes one good hand.”

The words reduced Sam to a cost-benefit analysis. It wouldn’t do to pay the one-handed guy for a job he could only half-do, but he’s more than worth the money if it only takes one hand. Had there been conversations? Did Dad know? He could ask Roger, but didn’t want to seem like some kid asking if it was okay with his folks. Roger had offered him a job. His bank account had been loaded up with worker’s comp, but that it wouldn’t last, and there weren’t a lot of good jobs around catering to cripples. Brick went underground for ten more dollars an hour. Probably didn’t even think twice.

Underground. It stuck in Sam’s head. Working underground. He’d listened to the stories his whole life. Exciting ones, scary ones, boring ones. Dad’s stories. Granma’s stories. Even some from Roger and Brick in the machine shop. He’d never imagined working underground himself, and had never been closer to the inside of the mine than the day he watched Dad haul Jimmy up to the ambulance. Could he do it? Did he want to? The thought of going back to the last place he’d seen his fingers made him lightheaded, and the Frisbee of a sandwich on the table in front of him looked less appetizing.

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s a lot to think about.”

“It surely is,” Roger said. “I’ve got to have somebody training in on Monday. I’ll get somebody else if you’re not interested, but the job’s yours if you want it.” Another burst of laughter bounced around the room, and Sam heard the bell on the door ring.

“I appreciate that.” And he did. People didn’t seek you out for job offers in Pike County. Roger might be breaking protocol a bit. Sam caught Roger glancing at his hand, and guilt hung on his weary face. Not just for Sam, but for Jimmy, and for long hours, safety shortcuts, and answering to bosses in some other state before his own workers. The kind of guilt he probably deserved.

“This must be an interesting conversation,” Dad said, walking up to them.

“It was until you got here,” Roger said as Sam turned in his seat. “You boring old fart.” Roger stood and smiled, slapping Dad on the shoulder as he stepped away. “He’s all yours.”

“Tell me about it,” Dad said. “Don’t run off, though. I want to talk to you about those sensor heads.”

“It’s Saturday,” Roger said without turning back. “Have some coffee and quit worrying.”

Dad watched him rejoin the laughing men, and then sat down in his seat. He took out his Skoal can and stuffed a larger-than-usual wad into his lip. He looked at Sam for a second before speaking, as if checking him for imperfections.

“What brings you up the road?” he said, spitting into his Pepsi can.

“Jake dropped me here. I need a ride to my truck.”

“Where’s your truck?”

“Campbelltown.”

“Okay.” Another spit. “Want to finish your sandwich first?” He stood back up without waiting for an answer and walked over to Roger’s table. Sam took a few more bites of tenderloin and watched the men. No one laughed now, but one bearded man told

a story, and the others listened intently. Occasionally one or two would interrupt him to explain something or get clarification. Sam couldn't hear every word, because the women's voices from the other end of the table made it hard to hear, but the conversation centered on reeling in a channel cat on the White River north of Petersburg.

Dad pulled Roger away from the group and they began a quieter conversation further down the table. He was irritated about something. Sam couldn't muster the energy to root for either of them. Instead, he contemplated how to broach the subject of the job offer with Dad. He didn't know nearly enough to make an informed decision. If it weren't for the fact that they always seemed to have one in the shop, he probably wouldn't even know what a loader was. As it stood, he didn't have the slightest idea how to operate one beyond starting and stopping its engine. Was it easy? Hard? Safe? Dangerous? If he approached it right, he might be able to get facts from Dad before opinions.

The sandwich had dropped like a cinder block in his stomach. Roger slapped Dad's shoulder once more before rejoining the larger group. Men here never really grew up. Like ten-year-olds, they'd argue and then hit each other to show they were done.

"You ready to go?" Dad said from the end of Sam's table, barely close enough to be heard.

Outside, the heat continued to oppress. The two cornfields across the highway had begun to wither. The weatherman predicted a hundred degrees today, and it felt like he'd been spot-on. The sun drooped, but still stood white-hot in the pale sky.

"Okay, where we going?" Dad asked. "Ain't got all day."

“Campbelltown, I said.” Sam wanted to give him the turn-by-turn to avoid explanation.

“So just drop you off in the middle of the road, then?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” The day’s heavy conversations left Sam with little patience for Dad. “You talked to Jake lately?”

“Few days ago. Why?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “He’s just seemed different lately.” Sam had told Jake he wouldn’t tell anybody about his story. He hadn’t promised not to go fishing.

“Your brother’s always been different,” Dad said, fishing in his lip for spent tobacco.

“True enough,” Sam said. “Still, he seems, I don’t know, mellower.” He considered spilling the beans. If there was some Esau in Jake, maybe Dad should know.

“Age’ll do that to you,” Dad said, flinging the wad of tobacco out of his half-lowered window. The moment passed, and Sam knew that he’d keep Jake’s secret though it felt strange to suddenly share such closeness. They drove in silence for a few minutes before the first curves of Campbelltown weaved under the truck. “I can’t remember,” Dad said. “Do Julie’s folks live on the right or left?”

“The left.” Sam sank in the seat.

“That’s right. I remember now. They’re on the same road as Tom Blackburn.”

“Good to know you’re not going senile just yet.”

When they pulled into the long gravel drive, Julie and the boys weren’t home, and other than a glance from Julie’s mom through her front drapes as they pulled away, Sam managed to follow Dad home without further embarrassment.

The air in Dad's kitchen felt heavenly to Sam after the searing heat. He couldn't remember the last time it rained. It could have been the day he lost his fingers, but surely it hadn't been that long. Dad would know if Sam cared to ask. He kept track of such things. Rain, frost, moons, seasons. Sam had never had much of a grasp of them.

"Your hand okay?" Dad asked, snapping Sam from his thoughts. He sat at the kitchen table, Pepsi can in hand.

"Fine. Healing." It came automatically.

"Huh. Must have been a different guy with Julie Granderson at the fair last night bleeding in the parking lot."

Sam smiled. "How'd you find out?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really. Do I get a lecture now?"

"When have I ever lectured you?" He had a point. He didn't lecture, in the common sense, but Sam had felt the heat of many pointed comments and harsh jokes.

"So is there a problem, then?" Sam asked.

"Not for me. But I'm guessing the more brawls you get in with girls' husbands in public, the harder it's gonna go for you." He started sorting through the mail scattered on the table. Four days' worth, probably.

Sam wanted to ask whose business it was, anyway, but the question didn't matter. It was everyone's business, because there was so little business to be had. "What am I supposed to do about it?" he asked instead. "It's not like I was putting on a show. He jumped me."

“I don’t doubt that. But you were the only one got jumped.” He said it as if it explained everything.

“Bullshit. People get in fights all the time around here. There’s something in the *Dispatch* every week about the cops getting called to the Bob Inn or some house where people are busting lamps over each other.”

“And those are the people you want to be compared with?” Dad didn’t look up from the mail.

“So I’m a wife beater now?” He thought of Michelle on the floor of their apartment, and how he took his guitar and left. Dad probably knew that somehow, too.

“No.” Dad opened an envelope with his pocketknife. “You’re just a lazy kid with too much time on his hands.” He puffed the end of the envelope and slid the contents out into his hand.

Sam stared at him, still amazed after all these years at his carelessly hard words. “And what were you doing all morning? The waitress told me you didn’t come in before noon on Saturdays, which is funny, since that’s where you always tell me you’re going.”

Dad looked up from his mail. “Maybe I just need to get out of the house.”

“Kiss my ass.”

Dad squinted his eyes, as if trying to decipher something on Sam’s face. “You know what I’d have gotten if I’d have said that to my dad?” Sam didn’t say anything, both glad and sorry for his words. “A nice long stay in the hospital.”

“Well, I’ve already had one of those.”

“You have. And it’s time you got over it.” He sorted through the mail a second time. “You need something to occupy your time. Keep you out of trouble.”

“Funny you should mention that, because I got a job offer today.” Dad dropped the mail on the table again.

“From who?”

“Roger Pirkle.” The sound of a chainsaw down the road echoed through an open window. Maybe Guaman was doing some landscaping.

“For the loader?” Dad asked. Sam nodded. “And you told him no, I guess.”

“I told him I’d think about it.”

“Nothing to think about.” Dad tapped his fingers on the table. “You’d need two hands to run that thing.”

“That’s not what Roger said.”

“Roger’s full of shit.” Neither of them had turned on any lights. They argued in sharp beams of sunlight cutting in from the living room.

“About his job?” Sam said. “Not likely. You just said I needed something to do. I’m pretty sure a full-time job counts as something. I just want to know if there’s anything I need to know before I make up my mind.”

“Sounds like it’s already made up.”

“Goddamn it, Dad, I’m asking for advice. I’m not asking if you want me down there. I’m asking if you think I can do it.” The conversation had gone immediately wrong. As usual.

Dad slammed his fist hard on the table. “A monkey could do it!” he shouted. “Hell, I’ve watched monkeys do it my whole life. That idiot I hauled out of the mine the day you hurt your hand, I’m pretty sure a real monkey’s smarter than him. It’s dark and filthy down there, and it’s as likely to kill you as feed you. It’s no place for you.” Sam



had never seen him so upset, not even after Danny had died, though Sam had been younger then, less aware. The flame in Dad's eyes made him feel eight again.

"There's not really any place for me now," Sam said. "Not with this." He looked at his hand but didn't raise it.

"I'll find you a place." Dad's voice became brittle. "I know some guys over at the co-op. Maybe some farmers are hiring."

"They're not hiring cripples."

"Jasper, then. One of the factories over there. Good shift work with benefits. Guys come and go all the time. You could go put your application in Monday morning."

"The mine's got benefits. And better pay."

"Christ, son, don't be stupid." Dad looked around the room, as if someone should be there to help him. "You'll get killed down there."

"You haven't."

Dad looked hard at Sam, then stood up and walked away, his hand dragging the pile of mail across the table. It fell to the floor with a slap.

## Chapter Ten

On his first day back to work, Sam rode in with Guaman. Dad spoke little to Sam after their discussion of the loading job, except to say that he had to go in too early on Sam's first day for Sam to tag along. Sam had walked across the road immediately to ask Guaman for a ride. "You are working at the mine again?" Guaman asked. When Sam told him about the new job, Guaman looked across the road at Dad's house uncertainly, but said, "Of course, chochera. I will give you any rides you need." Sam thanked him and crossed back to Dad's, descended into the basement, and didn't come out for much until Monday morning.

True to his word, Dad was gone when Sam crept upstairs at five a.m., though he'd left the same old lunchbox on the kitchen table. Sam crossed the dark road to Guaman's house wearing the same boots he'd worn in the machine shop, the same coveralls and work shirt Dad had loaned him. A single window glowed in the tiny house Sam had called home, but before he made it to the porch, the front door swung open and Guaman shuffled out, lunch bucket in one hand, boots in the other. "Nos vemos esta tarde, amor," he said as the door swung shut. A reply came from inside, but Sam couldn't make out the

words, Spanish or otherwise. He looked at Sam. “El minerito más nuevo,” he said, tossing his boots into the back of the truck.

“What does that mean?” Sam had forgotten to bring a change of shoes for after work.

“You’re a burrower now.”

As they drove, Sam felt like it was his first day of school. There would be more to learn than in the machine shop. He wouldn’t have been able to start this job without previous underground experience when the United Mine Workers ran the show, but the rules were more pliable now. Something Roger surely thanked his lucky stars for every night. The mine property looked like a lunar base in the dusty pre-dawn heat, and the open door of the machine shop glowed in the darkness. The last place he’d been whole. Men already bustled about inside, since they didn’t have to sit for the morning safety meeting with the miners. Something big rested on the lift for repairs.

“Anything I need to know before the meeting?” Sam asked Guaman, hoping he didn’t sound nervous.

“Nothing I know of,” Guaman said. “Only listen. That’s important. Your father will say things you need to hear.” He stuffed the stub of his Swisher Sweet in the ashtray by the door. “Things we all need to hear.”

Sue met Sam in the hallway. Her eyes never left his, and Sam wondered if she saw Guaman move past her. “Oh, Sam,” she said. “It’s so good to see you. I meant to come visit you in the hospital, but one of my grandbabies graduated from preschool, and then the water heater quit working, and—” She stopped for a moment, tears shining in her eyes. “We’re all so sorry for what happened.”

“That means a lot.” Sam glanced past her to see if Dad or Roger were nearby. Halfway down the hallway, he realized Sue’s tears hadn’t affected him. No self-pity, no sadness. He just wanted to work.

Roger’s door was closed, but Sam could hear Dad and Roger’s voices from the other side. He hoped Roger would keep Dad occupied for as long as possible this morning. He couldn’t avoid Dad forever working here, but he wanted to get to the job first. If he could learn it well, Dad might give him space.

In the mudroom, the benches were mostly full. Sam took a spot next to the two black men he didn’t know. Across the room, Julie stared at him. He’d forgotten about her in the mad rush to get the job sorted out. They hadn’t spoken since she’d dropped him off on Saturday morning. Could that have only been two days ago? Her look suggested it had been too long for her. He dropped his eyes to the cracks in the concrete floor as Dad blew into the room, bellowing before he even stopped walking.

“Okay, gang.” He stopped and raised a foot onto one of the benches. “Pretty normal day. The miner’s running as well as it’s gonna.”

“Hooray,” Brick said from Sam’s left, wearing a Carhartt shirt that appeared to be made of iron. Sam’s thin flannel looked like gauze by comparison.

“The big mantrip’s in the shop this morning,” Dad continued, “so it’s gonna be a late trip down for some of you. G-Man, you can stay up for now, and we’re not ready to bolt yet, so Gideon and Hoot, you two can sit on your thumbs until the second trip.” Everyone laughed. Dad’s authority came easy here. “Big John, you got anything to add?” Everyone’s attention turned to a man sitting in the back of the room. He was large, but not fat. Taller than Brick, with a fuzzy beard that reached his sternum.

“Naw,” Big John said without standing.

“Alright then. Remember, it’s dry up here, so it’s dry down there. Keep your damn masks on if you don’t want to be hacking up your lungs.”

“Jesse,” Roger said from the edge of the room. Sam hadn’t seen him come down the hall. Dad looked to Roger, who nodded toward Sam.

“Oh, right.” Dad pursed his lips. “This fresh meat sitting next to Gideon is my boy Sam. You probably remember him from the machine shop. He’ll train in on loader two today.” Sam started to stand, and then realized no one had asked him to. He hovered briefly instead, probably looking like the Elephant Man. “If you catch him loafing, kick him in the butt. Okay, let’s get to work.” He clapped his hands and everyone broke up. Sam rose and moved with the group. He got five steps before Dad’s hand fell on his shoulder. “Not yet.” He steered Sam back toward the main office hallway.

“Why not?” Sam said.

“Because if you thought you had a lot of paperwork to fill out to work in the machine shop, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” He led Sam into the familiar room behind Sue’s desk. Folders littered the tabletop.

“Everything’s marked with little sticky notes, Sam,” Sue said. No doubt in bright colors with little decorations.

“When you’re done, head back to the break room and wait for G-Man,” Dad said, and then he was out the door.

“Can you still write?” Sue asked, turning in her desk chair, *People* magazine in hand. More tears lurked behind her half-moon reading glasses.

“It’s fine. I’m right handed.”

“Oh, thank the Lord.” She fanned her face with the magazine. “I’ve been so worried. Didn’t have the heart to ask your daddy about it.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, and then bowed his head over the stack of forms.

Dad had overestimated. Sam started filling out paperwork just after six-thirty and was done by nine o’clock. Most of it was of the “read this and then sign to prove you’ve read it” variety. Lots of state and federal forms. He laid the stack of folders and papers on Sue’s desk (she’d disappeared around a quarter-to-nine) and meandered down the hallway, wondering what to do while he waited on Guaman. He stood for a long time in front of one of the many maps of the mine property that dotted the offices and hallways. This one looked recent, a large printout of a satellite image. The aboveground property appeared in the picture—tiny squares and rectangles that matched up to the buildings all around Sam, including the one he stood in. The mine itself had been outlined in bright blue, descending southeast from the entrance before it doglegged back to the southwest and widened considerably.

The surface features above the mine fascinated Sam. He saw at least two small ponds he’d fished before, and several houses stood just a hair’s breadth from the blue borders of the mine. One of the houses belonged to Eddie Uppencamp, the old man who played the piano at church. Jake and Sam had helped him carry a pool table to his basement when they were younger, and Sam remembered the house smelling like Listerine and wet dog. Some of the mine borders—the ones near houses and roads—were solid. Others, further down the dogleg, were dashed, and according to the map key, the dashed lines meant “temporary.” Places the mine could go deeper, he assumed.

Another map showed a drafted version of the mine with more detail underground, including some sort of complex grid system. From the entrance, the interior contained long hallways both horizontal and vertical that crossed each other through the entire length of the mine, with large squares between them. It also showed other underground structures outside of the borders of the mine, labeled as “existing excavation.” Were they other mines, caves, or something else? They came pretty close to the Friendship Mine in a few spots. Question marks had been penciled over a couple of these locations, but didn’t show up in the map key.

“Do you like the map?” Guaman said, walking up beside him.

“It’s interesting, but I don’t really know what I’m looking at.”

“Learn to see those—” He pointed to the large squares between the hallways. “—and you will be fine.”

“Are those support beams?”

“I’ll show you. First you need these.” He handed Sam two small, rectangular pieces of brass. Both had a small hole drilled in one end, with a long, thin piece of wire looped through. On one, the wire had been twisted together at the other end, forming a closed loop. On the other, it stuck out in two sharp ends.

“What’s this?”

“Come over here.” Guaman gestured to the mudroom. Just off the main room, he pointed to a large board on the wall, maybe three feet tall and five feet wide. At the top, it had “Black Stallion Mining, Inc.” printed in big blue letters with the silhouette of a bucking horse on each end. Below that, in smaller letters, “CHECK-IN.” A grid covered the rest of the board, each square holding a number between one and five hundred, along

with a small metal post. On some of these posts hung tarnished rectangles like the ones Sam held.

“There’s a book in the office,” Guaman said, “with the names of all who work underground. Each name has a number.”

Sam looked at his pieces of brass. Each had a small three-digit number pressed into it. “Three fifty six,” he said.

“Find your number on the board. Then place the tag.”

Sam found his number to the far right of the board, away from most of the others. He hung the looped wire on the post.

“Now,” Guaman said, “attach the other to your clothes somewhere out of the way, but where it is safe and is seen.”

Sam looked over his clothes for a moment before settling on one of the riveted buttons on the side of his coveralls. “Will this work?”

“You’ll find out,” Guaman said as Sam twisted the wire securely around the button. Sam couldn’t see Guaman’s tag. “Now they know when you’re in the ground. If they find you, they will know who you are.” They walked to another room. “You wear this.” He handed Sam a helmet, bright orange, with reflective stickers on it. “And this.” A light attached to a battery pack with a thick rubber cord. “The light goes here.” He snapped the light onto a metal plate on the front of the helmet and grabbed the battery back from Sam. “This button makes bright and dim,” he said. “Like headlights.” He pushed the button a few times, and the wall in front of Sam went from bright to blindingly bright. “Don’t shine bright in faces.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”



“We will remind you.” He showed his gold teeth. Sam attached the belt hook on the battery pack to the side opening of his coveralls. He could tell already that his clothing choices weren’t great.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“One more thing.” Guaman rifled through a metal storage cabinet. “Here you go,” he said, tossing something to Sam, who caught it and looked it over. A small silver container shaped like a canteen and wrapped in thick blue fabric. “Instructions are on the inside. That’s your self-rescuer. If alarms go off, or if the air smells funny, you open it and put it on.”

“Is it a mask?” It was heavy for its size.

“Yes, chochera. Oxygen is good. Now we’re ready.” He turned and walked out the side door. They came out on the far side of the main building, in the narrow alley between it and the machine shop. As always, the door of the machine shop stood open. Sam looked inside. He couldn’t see the sheet metal press, but saw the old faces going about their business. The mantrip on the lift today was smaller than the one he and Guaman climbed into. No one looked through the door at him.

“You know, I’ve fixed a few of these,” Sam said, getting comfortable in the front seat, “but I’ve never actually ridden in one.”

“There are always first times.” Guaman wrenched the mantrip into gear with a grinding noise. It would be on the lift again soon. He drove fast, kicking up gravel and coal behind them. The generating station loomed on their right, a large gray box emitting a constant whine as it whirled up the huge amounts of power needed to keep an underground mine operational. A large orange sticker on the dashboard read “PRE-OP

CHECK LIST,” and below that, “METHDET, LIGHTS, HORN, BRAKES, SCSRS.”

Sam wasn't sure what the first and last were, but he hadn't seen Guaman try the horn, lights, or brakes yet. They fishtailed along parallel to the beltline on their left. Sam had never seen the entrance before, only the rock face that blocked it from view. The mantrip sped around this wall of limestone and down a steep incline. On the right, a brown hillside covered with scrub vegetation slid by in a blur. Guaman drove with one hand while he used the other to smoke a cigar Sam hadn't seen him light.

Suddenly, the beltline dipped below Sam's line of sight, and the left side of the road dropped off into a ravine. A metal guardrail ran along it, covered with dents and scuffmarks. The road dropped lower, too, and the opening to the mine loomed large in front of them. It reminded Sam of an open garage, with a gray wall on each side and a large gabled wall above it. The front of the gable said “Black Stallion Mining, Inc.” in large letters, with “Friendship Mine” below, and then the familiar “The Best Safety Device is a Careful Employee.” Guaman had slowed down, but not enough to call it careful. Above the entrance sat two enormous fans running so loudly than Sam couldn't have made himself heard if he'd wanted to. Dull, yellow-red lights sprang up ahead in the darkness. The left side of the opening housed a large convex mirror, like the ones in shopping center aisles, which probably kept Guaman from plowing into anyone exiting as fast as he entered. On the left, a great tangle of wires and cables snaked into a bundle over the edge of the road, probably hooking up with the beltline below. As they passed the mirror, he looked up and saw his funhouse reflection, and then the mantrip lurched inside the mine.

It took a while for his eyes to adjust. Once they did, he took a long look around. Guaman sped down a long, sloping road covered with a light gray dust that also coated the walls and ceiling. Here and there, access panels and electrical boxes dotted the sides of the passage, and occasionally they'd drive through a large arch that must have supported the roof. Sam waited for Guaman to speak, but they rode in silence as he smoked his cigar. Didn't mines explode sometimes? His safety goggles seemed dirty, but as they drove he realized the dirt wasn't on his glasses but in front of them. Tiny specks of dust hung in the air, picked up by the lights on the mantrip and the ones on Guaman's helmet. Sam reached to his side and pressed the battery pack on his coveralls. A new beam of light sprung up in front of him, filled with the same specks. As he breathed, the dust rolled over his lips and stuck to his tongue and throat. He didn't cough, but swallowed repeatedly. The specks filled the void, like mist on a dark highway.

A large wall loomed ahead, but as they slowed, Sam saw it was instead a steel door blocking the passage.

"This will go faster if you help," Guaman said.

"Happy to." Sam rolled out of the low-riding mantrip, scraping his helmet on the ceiling as he stood. "What are we doing?"

Guaman grabbed a handle and pushed it hard. It gave with a screech, and the rigidness between the two door panels melted as it swung toward the wall. "You push the other one," Guaman said with a grunt. Sam laid his hands on the left side of the door and pushed. It moved easily on its hinges despite its weight. As he reached the wall, the mantrip rolled by him, stopping ten yards past the door. "Now we close it," Guaman said. With the gates locked behind them, they drove on in the darkness.

After a while, Guaman stopped and switched off the ignition. Blood rushed in Sam's ears, and a faint hum emanated from nearby. Guaman disappeared around a rock face, and Sam stood to take in the scenery. This place was a different from the entryway. That had been a single passage cut into the rock. Here, there were flat rock faces to the sides, but they opened into other passageways every few yards. Sam stepped forward to see where Guaman had gone. Gazing down the side passage, he saw that it also had sides that opened into other passages. His headlamp didn't shine far enough to see the end of the passage. The main hallway looked to be six or seven yards wide, covered bottom, side, and top with the gray dust. Random boxes and panels hung on the walls here, too, and a large bundle of cables ran down the center of the ceiling, likely the same one that fell over into the beltline ravine at the entrance. One wire hung lower than the others, and had a small reflective sign on it that read "EXIT" with an arrow pointing to the entrance. Flat, squarish plates with metal posts poking down from their centers dotted the ceilings on both sides of the bundle. Though he'd never seen one, and had no idea how they worked, Sam recognized these as roof bolts, used to keep the ceiling from crashing down. His breath puffed out from his face to the ceiling as he stared. The whole place reminded him of the ice passages in *The Empire Strikes Back*—rough, industrial, and incomplete.

"Come here, Sam," Guaman called from down the passage on Sam's left. Sam turned and walked toward the faint echo of Guaman's voice. He made two more turns before realizing he didn't know where to go.

"Where are you?" He tried not to sound nervous.

"Here," came Guaman's voice, much closer. Sam turned again and found him standing near the beltline, which lurched along, moving a continuous and large pile of

coal toward the mine entrance. An electrical panel hung open in front of him, clogged with wires.

“On my tool belt is a small plastic box,” Guaman said, his hands buried in the panel. He seemed to be concentrating. “Can you open it and find the smallest wire cap? Should be blue.” Sam came up with the blue cap almost immediately. “Good. Now twist it onto these wires.” Sam squinted and saw that Guaman held two copper nubs in his gloved fingers.

“No problem.” Sam reached toward the exposed copper.

“Don’t touch them. Many volts.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cap applied, he and Guaman walked back to the mantrip. As they climbed in and the engine whined to life, Sam looked at Guaman. “What exactly do you do down here?” he asked.

“Many things. But mostly, I maintain the sensor line.” Sam glanced ahead, alarmed at how low the ceiling had become. Guaman didn’t seem concerned.

“What’s a sensor line?”

“Belt lines get hot. A sensor line runs above them. If they smell smoke, an alarm rings in the office. They call me to see if it’s smoke or fire.”

“How often is it fire?”

“Almost never. Beltlines make much friction, but don’t burn easily. But as your father says, better safe than sorry.” He smiled, but Sam couldn’t remember Dad ever saying that. “It’s old technology, but all mines—how do you say it? Cut corners?”

“Great,” Sam said. “So you just drive around to false alarms all day?” He slumped further in his seat, waiting to hear the mantrip’s roll bar clang against the ever-lower ceiling.

“Some days yes. Other days I run errands. Whatever needs done. In Peru, they called people like me ‘rata de mina’.”

“Mine rat?”

“Your Spanish improves.”

“Not really.”

The tunnel stretched endlessly before them. Once, Guaman took a right turn, but otherwise they drove straight. Sam hadn’t expected such a long trip. “How much further?” he asked, once the ceiling returned to a comfortable height.

“Thirty minutes.”

“Seriously? How far is it?”

“Nearly four miles.”

“Underground?”

“Of course,” Guaman said, missing Sam’s amazement.

“Holy shit.” Guaman furrowed his brow and kept driving.

The passages flew by like pages in a flipbook. Most stood dark and empty, though a few contained supplies, dirty vehicles, or contraptions Sam didn’t recognize. Twice, he caught the glow of a large metal object covered in swatches of reflective tape. The second time, he saw the word “REFUGE” blurred as they drove by. He’d expected the mine to feel like a cave, but it seemed more like an abandoned warehouse, or a mothballed airport with tiny hallways and no windows. The passages were wider than he’d anticipated, and

the only claustrophobia came from low ceiling. It looked lower than it was, but he noticed some long, deep scratches in the rock of the ceiling. Or was it the roof? If there were roof-bolters, it must be a roof, not a ceiling.

Sam heard the coal face before he could see it. After driving for nearly an hour, a deeper rumble overtook the whine of the mantrip. Guaman pulled them into a side passageway and killed the engine.

“Are we there?” Sam said.

“Nearly.” Guaman hopped out of his seat. “You follow me now. Don’t wander.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The ground felt softer than it had earlier. Not wet exactly, but pasty. The noise grew louder as they walked, and large plastic sheets hung across some of the side passages a few yards off the main drag. Ahead, light filled the passage, and as they got closer, he made out shapes. Chairs. A table. A microwave. Coffee cups. A break room dropped in the middle of the mine. Against a column of rock stood a full-size refrigerator.

“Do you have food?” Guaman asked.

“In the office fridge,” Sam said, realizing his hunger too late.

“If I come back down, I’ll bring it.” More plastic sheets hung in the nearby passages, waving gently in the fan-generated breeze.

“What are the plastic sheets for?” Sam asked.

“Air flow to the face.” Guaman placed something in one of the makeshift cabinets. The ground grew wetter and thicker, as if they walked through cake batter. Guaman led him down a few more passages, and then lifted one of the thick sheets.

“Follow close,” he shouted over the noise, looking into Sam’s eyes until Sam nodded.

“Very dangerous here.”

They stepped through the curtain and it fell with a heavy flutter. In front of Sam, nothing quite made sense. The din of machinery, which had built during their descent, now seemed deafening, combining a roar with heavy grinding. If Guaman spoke, Sam didn’t hear him. No one had mentioned ear protection. After the noise, he found the blackness most disorienting. The break room had been well lit with fluorescents. Even on the drive down, the headlights of the mantrip lit the passage evenly. Here, darkness prevailed. No overhead lights cast a comforting wash across the passages, and Sam waded through the muck nearly blind, unsure of where the walls stood. The only light came from the helmets of other miners, bulbs and LEDs on machinery, and flickering bursts of reflective tape that flared up when hit by a helmet beam. Occasionally, kaleidoscopic shades of yellow, green, or orange danced across the surfaces like fireworks.

Sam stayed close to Guaman as they made their way toward a massive machine Sam assumed was the continuous miner. Brick stood off to one side with a control box in his hand, watching something Sam couldn’t see, glancing repeatedly toward the thick power cable running from the miner back through the passageway. When Brick saw Sam, he gave a smile and a nod. With the light from Brick’s helmet in his eyes, Sam only saw the big man’s eyes and teeth, both bright in the blackness. Only feet from Sam, one of the loaders, bright orange where it wasn’t covered in coal dust, barreled through the passageway, scooting at an alarming speed right up to the back of the continuous miner. It was half full of coal before Sam realized Julie drove it. Her frosted hair stuck out from



beneath her orange helmet, almost white in the dim passage. As she backed the loader away at breakneck speed, she caught a glance of Sam and winked at him.

“She likes you,” Guaman shouted. “Now come over here.” He led Sam away from the deafening noise of the miner and behind another plastic sheet. The area was quieter and almost completely dark. A light flickered around a corner just ahead. Beyond it, they found a man sorting through stacks of the same square plates attached to the ceiling. He turned at their swampy steps, and Sam saw he was one of the two black men. “Gideon,” Guaman said, “this is Sam. You expect him, right?”

“I reckon,” Gideon said.

“Good. Now I must go, Sam. Much to do.” Guaman disappeared into the blackness. Sam smiled at Gideon, who looked back at him warily.

“So you the new loader,” he finally said. He stood at least five inches shorter than Sam, probably a blessing down here. A thick mustache and grayish stubble coated his face.

“That’s what they tell me,” Sam said, turning to face Gideon, who raised his hands to cover his eyes.

“Did they tell you keep your light out of fellers’ eyes?”

“Oh, sorry.” Sam fumbled for the switch hooked to his coveralls pocket. Instead, it dangled loosely at his side. He pressed the button too many times and cycled back around to the high beam. The second time through, he got it turned off. “Sorry.”

“Ain’t nothing,” Gideon said. “You in luck today, though, because your boys up in the machine shed’ve got all our loaders running. Know what that means?”

“They’re doing better than usual?” Gideon laughed, loud and deep and open, showing the few teeth he’d managed to keep.

“Better than usual,” Gideon repeated. The last word came out “yoo-jul,” and Sam tried to place the accent. “That’s good stuff right there.” He leaned against the large stack of plates he’d been tending. “You Jesse’s boy, ain’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Well, then, you better learn things right, or you and me both’ll be up shit creek.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Sure you will,” Gideon said, not unkindly. “Good news is, with no loaders busted, you can learn to drive without mucking things up. Least for now.”

“I thought you were a roof bolter?” As Sam’s eyes adjusted, the walls around them began to show gray textures.

“I’m whatever they say I am. Me and Hoot bolts mostly, but Big John’s filling in while I show you how to drive a loader. I understand you got a bad hand?” Sam raised it into Gideon’s light. “Shoot, that ain’t so bad. Look here.” Gideon pulled up his shirtsleeve to show his forearm, which was missing a large chunk of flesh. In its place was a puckered crater of scar tissue, much lighter than Gideon’s skin, even in the dark.

“What happened?”

“Forgot the part where they said don’t stand too close to the dynamite.” He rolled his sleeve back down.

“Dynamite? You worked in strip mines?”

“Naw,” he said, as if insulted. “Tunnel rat my whole life. Me and Hoot worked twenty years down West Virginia before we come up here.”

Dad spoke of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky mines sometimes. He'd gone down with the UMWA in the eighties to show solidarity, and he'd come back disgusted by the working conditions. From what Sam had heard, some Appalachian mines still used the old blasting methods.

"Who's Hoot?" Sam asked.

"My baby brother. Can't miss him. Biggest nigger in the mine." He laughed again. "I got the looks, though." The words whistled through the gaps in his teeth. "Now come on, they ain't paying me to jaw."

For the next hour, Gideon taught Sam how to drive the loader, though "drive" oversimplified it. The loader was long and flat, close to twenty-five feet long. It weighed ten tons, could turn ninety degrees in the middle, and rolled through six inches of coal muck, so it didn't drive so much as lurch. Gideon sat in a tiny cockpit that stuck out just a few inches from one side of the loader. The seat faced in, so that Gideon had to look left or right to steer, depending on which direction he wanted to go. The seat itself nearly scraped the ground to keep the driver as low as possible, and a thick sheet of metal covered the cockpit to protect the driver if the roof dropped. Watching Gideon's hands at work, Sam saw why this could be the perfect job for him. The loader had three sets of controls. On the right, three levers operated the conveyor that ran along the top and moved coal from the continuous miner onto the beltline. The floorboard held a brake pedal that worked more or less like a car's. A steering joystick jutted from the left side of the console, with thumb-buttons for activating headlights on whichever end moved forward. The stick itself was small, so Sam could hold it effectively with just his index

finger and what was left of his middle finger. As he watched Gideon, the old roof-bolter pinched it between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a cigar.

Eventually, Gideon put Sam in the driver's seat. He barely fit, but had room to move once he settled in. Learning to steer perpendicular to the direction he faced didn't come easy. To move forward, Sam had to push the stick either left or right. Once Gideon felt he'd mastered the basics, Sam attempt to turn a corner. Nothing about the process made any sense. When moving to his right, he turned left by pulling back on the stick. He could turn right by pushing forward. When moving to the left, the directions were reversed. When he voiced his frustration at the disorientation, Gideon simply said, "Ain't nothing makes sense in a coal mine." On Sam's first attempt to turn a corner, he hit the wall hard with the front end of the loader, gouging a long black scrape onto the dusty gray wall.

"Shit," he said. "Sorry about that."

"Don't say sorry every time you smack a coal rib, or they'll mostly be paying you to say sorry. You look where they loading this week, you gonna see nothing but black edges. Why you think we always sending these up to get fixed?" He laughed. "Long as all you hit's walls, you fine."

They took their lunch break with the loader. Gideon's bucket sat atop a pile of roof plates, and since Guaman hadn't reappeared with Sam's lunch, he offered a few bites to Sam. Two bologna sandwiches and a large bag of hot fries. After a handful of fries, Sam wished he had a drink. Gideon sipped from a bottle of tea, but didn't offer Sam any.

"You know," Sam said, "Guaman might have brought my lunch down by now. Mind if I go check? I don't want to eat all yours." Gideon took another long drink.

“Who’s Guaman?”

“G-Man.”

“Oh. Whatever boats your float. I’m here all day.”

The break room stood empty, and from the nearby grind of the miner, Sam assumed the rest of the crew had already eaten. He didn’t see anything in the fridge, but there was a water cooler on one of the tables, so he took a long drink from a pointed paper cup and sat in one of the folding chairs. The legs gave a bit in the dirt. The thick plastic flaps directed both airflow and sound, creating muffled echoes that bounced from wall to wall.

“Howdy, stranger,” Julie said, appearing from around one of the pillars. Sam started to stand, and almost fell as the chair shifted under him. “Whoa. Don’t hurt yourself, killer.” He placed his hands on the table in front of him and finally managed to stand.

“I’ll try not to.” He smiled. Julie shook her head.

“Don’t feel like you got to figure everything out at once,” she said, going to the fridge and pulling out a can of Mountain Dew.

“There’s a lot to learn,” Sam said, not sure whether to move to her or stay by the table.

“Who said I was talking about the mine?” She winked at Sam, then popped the can open. Before she took a drink, she pulled a gob of tobacco out of her mouth and flung it down one of the side passages. “Surprised?” she asked.

“Not really. Well, yeah, I guess.”

“I know it’s gross. But easier than smoking in the loader. Safer, too. Though Brick’s smoked like a chimney since he came down here.”

“There’s a joke there somewhere.”

“How’s that?”

“Brick. Chimney. Smoke,” Sam said. She laughed.

“I thought you were making fun of me for a second.” She took a big chug of Mountain Dew.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sam said. “Unless we’re talking about your taste in wine.”

“That was some hangover juice, wasn’t it?”

“And how,” Sam said, taking a last drink of water. Even under a hardhat and smears of coal, she looked cute. “I had a good time Friday. We should do it again.”

“It?” She grinned.

“A date,” Sam sputtered. “Maybe a movie this time. Avoid the livestock.”

“I like that plan.”

“Well, I’d better get back to Gideon.”

“Yeah, Big John’ll be looking for me if I don’t get back too. Loader don’t load itself.”

“A damn shame.”

Julie smiled and disappeared around the corner, banking her Mountain Dew can into the garbage as she went.

Sam didn't know her anymore, really, but he was happy to see her. She seemed comfortable with him, which made him comfortable, too. If Pike County was home for good now, maybe there could be something. If the ex stayed out of the picture.

On the way back to Gideon, he lost his way. With all the passages meeting at right angles and no signage he recognized, he didn't know which direction he faced. He could head back toward the sound of the continuous miner, though the hanging plastic made the noise unreliable. Besides, he'd been warned enough times about standing or walking where he shouldn't. He clicked his light to the brightest setting and looked around. Standing at one of the many intersections between the forward and side passages, he didn't know which was which, so he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to hear anything other than the dull hum of the miner. Slowly, another sound emerged. A dull hissing or moaning, almost a voice, and under that, small crackles, like milk poured on cereal. Percussive noises hovered beneath these. No rhythm. Almost a feeling. The two tones slid into moments of harmony, low and lonesome, but fleeting, like a song from a passing car.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Dad's voice hissed behind Sam, whose eyes snapped open. A helmet light danced on the wall as he turned. He couldn't see all of Dad's face, but found his mouth, pursed so tightly that his lips were white.

"I guess I got lost," Sam said, shrugging. His confusion embarrassed him, but Dad's anger seemed an overreaction. "Sorry."

"Hell with sorry," Dad spat. "Get over here. Now." He stood twenty feet away, and gestured angrily for Sam to join him. Why was he whispering?

“Okay, okay.” Sam walked toward Dad. “I said I’m sorry. I was just grabbing some water. I’m going back to Gideon. You don’t have to—” Dad grabbed Sam by his coveralls and flung him hard into the moist ground.

“What the blazes is wrong with you?” Dad shouted, the words bouncing between the jagged walls.

“Nothing. I just—”

“Have no idea what you’re doing. Look at that roof.” He gestured with a taut arm toward the rock that had been above Sam’s head. “What do you see?”

“Rock,” Sam said, getting to his feet. The coal muck had soaked through the seat of his coveralls.

“Anything else, Einstein?” Sam didn’t see it until the second look. There were no plates on the roof where he’d stood. Above them now, the square plates were spaced every five or six feet in a grid pattern.

“I didn’t see—”

“No shit you didn’t see. You don’t see anything, even right in front of you.”

“I’m just trying to do my job.” The only defense that might work.

“And I’m doing mine. You even know what a fireboss does?”

Sam knew fireboss was Dad’s job title, and had been at other mines over the years. As a kid, he imagined it had come with magical powers. That Dad controlled the elements underground like a wizard. As he got older, he’d grown less interested. Even in the machine shop, he’d heard the term tossed around, but never considered it. Guaman said that Dad kept them safe.



“It means you’re in charge?” he said, unable to make it a statement. Dad stared at him.

“Out.” Dad pointed toward the break area. “Get your shit and get out of my mine.”

“Come on—”

“Don’t fuck with me on this, Sam. Gone for the day. No wages.”

“Just because you’re my dad doesn’t mean—”

“Walking under bad top’s a fireable offense. Keep talking and I’ll toss you out of here permanent.” Sam looked at the floor. Dad’s turf, not his. He hadn’t considered the difference between father and boss, because they’d never seemed dissimilar. He tried to look Dad in the eye, but couldn’t.

He made it half a mile toward the surface before a mantrip pulled up behind him. He stopped and turned toward the headlights. Dust shimmered in them. Guaman offered him a ride, and as they drove, though Guaman didn’t ask, Sam told him what had happened.

“You heard face music,” Guaman said after Sam explained the sounds he’d heard just before Dad found him.

“News to me.”

“It’s beautiful. And dangerous. If all is quiet, you can sometimes hear it from safe places, but it is only clear if you are against the face. Only bolters hear face music often, and then only if they listen instead of running their machines.”

“What is it?”

“Gases escaping from the rock. Tiny shifts in the face. In Peru, they said it was the earth singing to the miner.” He looked at Sam. “It is lovely, but not a thing to seek out.”

“Dad made that pretty clear.”

“He was right,” Guaman said. “It was a foolish place to be.”

Sam looked at his feet as they drove along the dark road. The roof hung low, but Sam didn't sink into his seat.

Topside, Guaman followed Sam into the main building, and they both retrieved their brass tags from the underground board.

“I don't suppose you're headed home anytime soon?” Sam asked.

“Sadly, no,” Guaman said. “But it is a lovely day for a walk.”

“It's ninety degrees.” Hot for September.

“You would like thirty instead? Before you go, chochera, I have something for you.” He opened the door on a rusty locker and pulled out a small paper bag.

“What's that?”

“Our talk of music reminded me.” He handed the bag to Sam. It smelled of tobacco. “If you like it, let me know. I may ask a favor.” He flashed a gold smile and slipped out the door, letting in a short blast of heat that mussed Sam's hair. Standing alone in the mudroom, he reached into the bag and pulled out a brown glass tube three inches long. On one end, it had a round lip that stuck out about an eighth of an inch all the way around. The other end had no raised parts, though the end was not as smooth as the rest of the glass. It had been ground down. The neck of an old liquor bottle. He poked the lone remaining finger on his left hand into the tube and smiled. A perfect fit.

## Chapter Eleven

The field behind Granma's house ran to a line of trees at the back of her half-acre. As a child, the yard between had seemed much larger to Sam. Several large trees, mostly oak, had towered over the land, and most summers Granddad planted a garden filled with sweet corn, tomatoes, zucchini, and half a dozen other vegetables. But thunderstorms felled the aging trees, and after Granddad died, the garden had gone to seed. Dad came over every fall to bush hog the tall grass on the back half of the property. From Granma's porch, Sam watched him now on Granddad's old Ford tractor, growling as it turned the grass under the blades. Sam drank tea, syrupy sweet but cool in the fall heat. The predicted storms had missed the county, and the tractor kicked up tan dust clouds. Displaced insects chirped angrily as Dad continued his back-and forth pattern in the late afternoon light.

The screen door creaked open and Granma wobbled out and dropped into the porch swing, which groaned under her weight. She wore a pink and yellow housedress with a stain near the collar.

"Your dad sure does work hard," she said, holding her own glass of tea.

“Harder than I ever could,” Sam said. Watching Dad at the mine over last month and a half, he’d come to appreciate the work ethic that had once bothered him. They’d given each other as much space as they could in the days after their confrontation under the bad top, but in a mine there’s not much space to give, and Dad had bigger concerns than avoiding his son. Sam had finally learned the duty of a fireboss—to walk every inch of the mine making sure the people working in it stayed safe. Dad’s long hours over the years had kept people from harm. It didn’t make him a good father, but probably one of the best miners in the county.

Sam had improved, too, learning where to walk, which spots to avoid, and how to drive the loader back and forth with nearly as much finesse as Julie. The two of them, along with Brick on the continuous miner, kept Big John and Dad happy. Sam’s relationship with Dad, both at work and at home, had settled into distant respect.

“Anything good on TV tonight?” Sam asked Granma. Since the Cardinals’ season had ended in the playoffs a couple of weeks ago at the hands of the Giants, Granma hadn’t had much to occupy her time. IU basketball would start in a few more weeks, but the interim between baseball and basketball was a dreadful time of year for her.

“Andy Griffith reruns. They finally got back around to the black and whites.” She didn’t have much use for the later, colorized episodes of *The Andy Griffith Show*, mostly because Don Knotts wasn’t around and Ronnie Howard wasn’t as adorable.

“Sounds fun.” As Dad mowed down the last of the tall grass, the tractor’s engine whined and grew silent. A different sound emerged from behind it, like a screaming child. “What’s that?” Sam looked around the field and the few scrawny trees that remained. The smell of cut grass hung thick.

“Blue jay,” Granma said. “They cry like that when they see a snake. Your dad probably riled one up with the bush hog.” She took another swig of tea. How did she know these things? Like Dad, always spitting out obscure facts of nature that Sam wouldn’t have guessed with an encyclopedia. As he watched Dad step off the tractor, condensation rolled off the glass and over the scars on his hand.

“Where’d you learn that?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know,” Granma said. “You learn things young, and then forget you learned them. You just know them. Least when you’re my age.” She pushed a bit with her legs, making the swing move back and forth unevenly, and then took a long drink of tea and looked toward the highway. “Don’t know why the mail’s taking so long today.” The wrinkles of her face cut deep in the late afternoon sun.

“Gosh almighty it’s hot out there,” Dad said as he tromped onto the gray wood slats of the porch. “Oughta hold you for a while, though, Mom.”

“You’re good boys,” Granma said. “Now let me fix you something to eat.”

Back at Dad’s house, Sam sat on the porch while Dad showered. Jesse Hightower couldn’t be accused of enjoying many luxuries, but he liked long, hot showers after sweaty work. The sun had dropped behind Guaman’s house, and the burgundy rays caught dust flecks hanging in the autumn air. Sam turned the glass bottleneck over in his good hand, and then slid it onto the index finger of the other one. The closed guitar case lay on the porch next to him. He’d gotten to this point a few times before, slide in hand, guitar ready, but something always stopped him. He’d come to see that dealing with incompleteness meant accepting limitations. Knowing which roads were blocked made it easier to navigate ones that weren’t. Pike County was home now, not just ancestrally, but

presently, and likely for the rest of his life. It grew harder each day to see that as a bad thing. His job paid well, and he enjoyed the people he worked with. His family supported him. Even Dad, from a distance. The fireboss had complimented him once or twice in the last month, always in passing, and in front of other miners. They ribbed him mercilessly after Dad stepped out of earshot, but Julie smiled as if she knew what it meant to him.

Julie remained the wildcard in his new old life. They saw each other every weekday and had gone on more dates, but neither wanted to risk repeating their night at the fire tower, as if it had completed something, and repetition would risk that completeness. Her boys stayed at her trailer on the weekend, and since she refused to fool around in the fireboss's house, their relationship had largely returned to their high school chasteness. They could get a hotel room somewhere or go on a trip, but working in a mine was as exhausting as Dad had suggested over the years. When weekends rolled around, they barely had enough energy to grab a bite and take in a movie between Julie's shifts at the gas station. Despite that, she'd become a part of his life here—the best part, honestly—and he wondered if it might be time to make sure she knew.

The glass tube hugged his index finger as if it belonged there. Sam reached down, flipped up the clasps on the guitar case, and raised the lid. The top wood, usually pale gold, glowed orange in the evening light. Wrapping his good hand around the neck, the string vibrations buzzed comfortably through his fingers. He pulled the guitar against his belly. It fit better after his weight loss. He held it against his body with his strumming hand and left leg, because he couldn't grip the neck as he once had, especially with his one good finger encased in the slide. For a moment, he felt his missing fingers find a C chord, but he ignored the sensation. He'd read somewhere that Johnny Winter used

Spanish tuning when he played slide, so he flipped the guitar to lay face-up. With his good hand, he dropped the first, fifth, and sixth strings down a whole step, plucking the strings with his thumb until the notes slid into place. Then he finagled the guitar back into place and grasped the pick in the “OK” gesture. He took a breath. Another. He ran the pick over the strings. The chord leapt into the summer air, thicker and darker with the open tuning. He missed having a firm grasp on the neck, but he used his right arm and left leg to keep the guitar secure. After a few more passes, he brought the slide to the top string and held it there.

He'd played slide a few times on records, but in the specialized world of studio music, most slide work fell to players who did it full time, either on lap steels or dobros. A squirrel raced manically up and the down the trunk of a nearby elm tree, its claws skittering on the slippery bark. Sam pressed the glass to the string and plucked, sliding slowly along the thin wire. The sound warbled recklessly, like music from an old sci-fi movie. He drew the slide back and brought it down again, this time against the top two strings. Moving more certainly, the harmony sounded loose and clumsy, but vibrant. He played a short melody on the two strings, similar to some Sabbath tune he couldn't remember. He stopped. Tony Iommi had lost the tips of his fingers in a factory accident. How could he have forgotten that? The accident had forced Iommi to put plastic caps on the ends of his fingers, helping create Sabbath's signature sound. Sam's heart leapt and he brought the pick down hard against all six strings. As the monstrous G chord echoed, he moved the slide around the two top strings, slipping off the B when necessary, and fashioning a melody to fit the lingering chord. Every fourth beat, he brought the pick

across all six strings again. With more control, he might manage lead and rhythm together.

After tinkering with the melody, he laid the slide over all the strings, and moved barre-style between chords. Stopping precisely on the frets gave him trouble, and the strings, too low for slide, buzzed constantly. Still, he savored the roughness of the wobbly sounds. The zip of the slide added depth to the music, denying silence between chords. The buzz drowned the melody at times, because the guitar wasn't set up for this. Sam wasn't either, but he could make do. A frog croaked somewhere near the pond, a great bleat that rose in pitch. Sam mirrored the sound by sliding along the bottom string. The frog croaked again, and they went back and forth momentarily, as if conversing.

He stopped to look for the frog, imagining he'd lured it closer, but instead saw Guaman crossing the road toward him. He started to put the guitar away, but even from a distance, Guaman's "don't do that" gesture was impossible to miss. Sam pulled the guitar back against his belly and slipped the pick between the strings.

"I could hear you from inside my garage," Guaman said, stopping at the porch steps. He looked around the yard. "It's okay I'm here?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I like to be sure." He put a foot on the second step and rested his elbow on his knee.

"Afraid the fireboss is gonna shoot you from the window?" Guaman frowned.

"Never mind. What's up?"

"You're using the slide." Guaman nodded toward the bottleneck snugged on Sam's finger.



“Trying. Hard when you’re not used to it.”

“Many things are.”

“True enough. So what’s up in your garage?”

“Changing oil.” A few dark smudges ran across his colorful T-shirt. “Cheaper than Wal-Mart.”

“Hell of a lot more work, too.”

“No. The mine is work. This I like.” He held his dirty hands up. “Besides, the truck is old, so changing oil is easy. New cars make it hard, so you go to Wal-Mart. But forget the oil. I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.” Guaman’s brows furrowed again. “Tell me your question.”

“You played the guitar, with the slide.”

“Which I never thanked you for.” Sam held it up between them. “So thank you.”

“It came from your yard.”

“What?”

“When they dug your father’s pond, a heavy bottle fell off one of the dirt trucks, so I picked it up. I didn’t want a flat tire.” Sam wondered what else was in Guaman’s garage. “The bottle broke, but the neck didn’t.”

“Well, I still appreciate it.”

“I’m happy to give it. But I would like you to play for me.”

“For you? Right now?”

“Not now.” Guaman smiled. “And not just for me.”

“Um—”

“And not only you. I mean—” He pursed his lips, irritated with his attempt at explanation. He showed Sam his palm in a starting over gesture. “My church. Pilar and Beatriz and I go to church. In—” He looked up, trying to remember. “—in Huntingburg.” Fifteen minutes east of Arthur on Highway 64, and nothing remarkable, unless it had changed drastically. In high school, basketball sectionals had been played there. “Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal. You have heard of it?”

“Can’t say that I have.” He’d noticed some churches with Spanish names in the area, but hadn’t given them much thought.

“It is from Latin America. You have heard of Alberto Mottes?”

Sam shook his head.

“He was an evangelista where I come from. A preacher,” Guaman said.

“Important. The Pastor of Presidents, they called him.”

“Like Billy Graham.”

“Who’s Billy Graham?”

“You say I’ll be playing with other people?” Sam asked, trying to get the conversation back on the rails.

“Yes.”

“And it’s a one-time thing?”

“If you want.”

“Well, you gave me the slide, and you looked out for me, so I owe you one. Question, though.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not a project for you, am I?” He’d wondered since Guaman gave him the slide.

“A project?” Guaman looked confused.

“Are you trying to take care of me? Fix me?”

His eyes grew big. “I’m no doctor, chochera. I don’t fix people. I have trouble keeping myself fixed. That’s why I have Pilar.”

“Okay.” He slipped the slide from his finger and rolled it in his good hand.

“When’s the gig?”

“Sunday,” Guaman said, as if it were the only logical answer. Three days.

#

The drought continued into Friday, and the rock dust burrowed into Sam’s throat as he worked. Unlike most of the other miners, he wore a filter mask when the dust was up, but even with protection, it felt like gargling sand. Dry air couldn’t keep the looming weekend from speeding the miners’ steps, though. They rocketed toward their seven cut quota, as if the whole crew had popped bennies.

Whatever uncertainties remained in Sam and Julie’s relationship outside of work, they’d become a well-oiled machine in the mine. Their loaders bobbed and weaved around each other through the mine passages, gobbling coal as fast as the continuous miner could chew it from the face and spitting it onto the beltline in black clots. They’d moved the beltline forward three times since Sam came underground, setting a site record. Gideon and Ball-Hoot hit a run of good top, which made bolting much quicker. Brick ran the continuous miner as far into the face as he could, and then he’d back it out and shout “Bolt it up and make it legal!”, the signal for them to roll their machine in, drill

the roof, drive long metal bars into the holes, and fill them with industrial epoxy. They fixed a plate to the few inches of bar poking out of the roof, and the epoxy dried it all in place. Lately, the West Virginian brothers could bolt a section in less than an hour, while Brick grated coal from the end of another passage. Sometimes Big John would stop someone to ask a question, and Dad wandered through occasionally, but mostly, the crew pulled cuts quickly and efficiently from the face.

Roger rolled into the break area with a load of passengers at lunchtime, stopping the mantrip a little hard and tossing rock dust into the air around the table.

“Howdy all,” he said, uncurling his lanky form from the driver’s seat. The passenger to his right stepped carefully from the mantrip. Sam didn’t recognize him, but he looked more out of place than Sam had on his first day underground. He wore a gold Carhartt jacket, dark denim pants, and heavy-duty work boots, all three nearly pristine. The jeans might have been pressed. His hair poked out from the hardhat, gray and neatly combed, and he wore squarish glasses with bifocal lenses beneath oversized safety goggles.

Another man stepped down from the bed of the mantrip, short and pudgy, but dressed in clothes that had seen work. A thick black mustache covered his mouth. Dad stepped down behind him, with a look that said he’d rather be discussing theology with Jake than tagging along with these three.

“Hiya, Roger,” Big John said, rising from his lunch. “What brings you down to the dungeon?” Sam didn’t know John as well as the rest of the crew, but he didn’t seem thrilled with the visitors.

“Got a surprise for you all,” Roger said. Dad, behind the other three men, crossed his arms. “This here’s Charlie Ross from Black Stallion Mining.” He gestured toward the man with the mustache.

“I actually work for Continental Natural Resources,” Charlie said. “Black Stallion’s parent company.”

“Course you do,” Roger said. “But he oversees most of the Black Stallion Mines in the Ohio Valley and Appalachia.”

“Best I can,” Charlie said with a smile.

Hoot and Gideon stared at their plates, Brick kept eating, and Big John stood by his lunch. Julie’s eyes shifted between Sam and the visitors. Sam watched Dad, the best barometer of the situation. His arms stayed crossed.

“And this here’s Russ Hume,” Roger said, gesturing toward the taller man in the clean clothes. A few heads turned at this name, though Sam didn’t recognize him.

“I voted for you!” Brick said loudly between bites of mashed potatoes.

“I like these fellas already,” Russ said, and the name finally registered. A State Senator.

“We’re just down here doing some fact-finding and whatnot,” Roger said. “We might talk to some of you here and there, but mostly just do your jobs. Nothing to worry about.” Not true, Dad’s face said. “Finish up your lunches. Jesse and I are gonna show these fellas around a bit.” He turned to Charlie and Russ, gesturing for them to follow him. “Now come take a look at this loader I’ve been telling you about,” he said to Russ. “Runs on batteries, so we’re going green.” The same line he’d used on Sam that first day

in the machine shop. The politician probably appreciated it more. They disappeared around a corner, leaving the crew to finish eating.

Nothing went quickly for the rest of the shift. When they fell into a groove, Roger appeared around a corner, waving his arms and wanting to talk. Sometimes all four men, and sometimes just Roger and Russ, or Roger and Charlie. Out of the two, Sam like Russ better, even with the spiffy clothes. Russ listened more than he talked and seemed to care about what he heard. Charlie, on the other hand, had a camera behind his eyes, documenting everything for future analysis. They spoke little to Sam, though he caught some of their conversations. Pulling out workers brought the whole crew to a halt repeatedly. They chatted with Brick for fifteen minutes, and the continuous miner sat idle for that quarter hour. Ironically, they mostly discussed efficiency, and what might increase coal production. “Toting those fellas outta here’d be a good start,” Ball-Hoot whispered behind Sam’s shoulder one of the times the question came up. Hoot was a lot like his brother Gideon, but much larger and with a more guarded demeanor. They both spoke in a West Virginian dialect that Sam found musical but often incomprehensible. Sometimes they’d look at an unbolted stretch of top and say that it was “sigogglin.” They referred to “lunch pokes” for the better part of a week before Sam figured out that they were talking about their brown paper bags. The more he talked with them, the more he liked them. Like Guaman, they fit and yet they didn’t.

“You fellas know how Arthur ended up on the map?” Roger asked the visitors once, and since the continuous miner had stopped, Sam sat in the loader and listened. Charlie looked uninterested, while Russ seemed stumped. Dad had disappeared. “The air-line railroad ran their survey in the late 1800s to see where to lay their track. The survey

ran south of Winslow, which put folks who'd settled there in a tizzy, and they started buying up plots of land where Arthur and Augusta are today. Bought it all from a fella named Arthur Thompson, who was happy enough to put his name on a town he thought sure'd be booming soon." He adjusted his hard hat. "Long story short, the railroad changed its survey, and the line ran just south of Winslow after all. If they hadn't found coal out here, Arthur probably would've dried up."

"So everybody lives here because of a bait-and-switch?" Charlie asked.

"I think they live here because they know an opportunity when they see it," Russ said. Sam got the feeling it had a deeper meaning between the men, but the continuous miner roared back to life before Sam heard any more. Brick's fingers moved across the control box for the miner as if he played an instrument.

Quitting time came later than usual for a Friday, and no one said much in the mantrip as they made the long drive back to the surface, unhappy that Roger's guests had kept them at the face so late. The crew used the largest mantrip for shuttling to and from the face at the beginning and end of shifts, unless it was in the shop. Big John and Julie usually sat in the two front seats, which left Brick, Gideon, Ball-Hoot, and Sam to fill the bed. If Dad caught a ride back with them, Julie joined the rest of the crew in the bed, and Sam always made sure to scoot in next to her. With Dad entertaining politicians today, Julie rode up front and Sam sat uncomfortably between Brick and Hoot.

"You know what they're doing here," Brick said as they rode. This mantrip, like the loaders, ran on batteries, so the noise of dirt and rock under the tires echoed around them.

"Nope," Big John said from the front, "and neither do you."

“It’s the sulfur,” Brick said. “Washington says no more coal, and by God, no more high sulfur coal for sure.”

“A lot of sulfur in this coal?” Sam asked. Hoot and Gideon chuckled.

“Nothing but, almost,” Gideon said.

“Come on, Hightower. Don’t you know what you’re hauling around?” Brick asked. He picked a small chunk of coal from his boot and held it in his helmet light. “This here’s bituminous coal.”

“Okay,” Sam said.

“Only coal you’re gonna find in Indiana,” Brick continued.

“Or West Virginia,” Gideon said. It came out “Virginny.”

“Reason I’m wearing this, too,” Big John said from the front, holding up a small black box that monitored methane levels. “Bituminous is the worst for firedamp.”

“I’ll bite,” Sam said. “What’s firedamp?”

“You know when you see on the news about a mine exploding and killing everybody underground?” Brick said, as if asking about a movie. “That’s firedamp. Explosive gas. And bituminous has got more of it than any other coal.”

“So Washington doesn’t like firedamp?” Sam asked.

“Washington don’t give a shit if we blow ourselves up,” Brick said. “They just don’t like the sulfur. Bad for the environment, they say.”

“They say it because it’s true,” Julie said without turning around.

“Bad for some folks’ environment,” Brick said. “My environment would be in worse shape without it. No car in my garage. No food on my table.” He laughed. “My environment and their environment’s two different things.”



“You’re hopeless, Potts,” Julie said.

“What’s it matter?” Brick asked. “Black Stallion’ll mine the last of this coal faster than Washington can stop them, ship it to the steel mills, and then we’ll be looking for work again.”

“Speaking of which, I hear Toyota’s getting ready for another round of hiring,” Big John said as the mantrip rolled with a whisper through the long dark.

#

Jake and Libby lived in the old church parsonage, a modest two-story house that leaned slightly to one side. The lean hadn’t worsened since they were boys, so it must have been built that way. Sam parked his truck in the church lot and walked across the brown grass to the front door, carrying an angel-food cake he’d bought at the IGA. He’d rather be out with Julie, but Jake had called and said Libby was making dinner for him. Out of excuses, he gave in. Sam had called Granma to see if she wanted to tag along, but her feet were bothering her. He’d miss her conversation skills.

He took a deep breath of dry air and raised his fist, but the door swung open before he knocked, and Danny appeared at Sam’s waist.

“What’s the password?” he whispered, wearing a hat made of cardboard and foil. A scratch ran along his left cheek.

“What happened to your face, kiddo?” Sam asked, squatting down.

“That’s not the password,” Danny said, raising a plastic sword.

“Oh,” Sam said. “How about ‘open sesame’?”

Danny looked at him. "I like that one. Okay, come in. Open sesame!" He swung his sword as if it were a gate. "Mom, Dad, Uncle Sam's here!" He stopped and looked back. "Your name's Uncle Sam!" He laughed and ran into the next room.

"Hello, Sam," Libby said, entering from the same room and reaching for the cake. "Oh, let me take that." She wore a simple tan dress and tennis shoes.

"Thanks, Libby. Where's Father Jacob?"

"Trying to get water from a stone. Or at least from the sprinkler."

Sam found Jake in the back yard at the end of a garden hose, holding a rectangular sprinkler in his hands and frowning in concentration.

"Hey, brother," he said when he saw Sam. "What's going on?"

"Waiting for you to spray yourself." The well-tended yard spread to a chain-link fence, with a small wooden playset for Danny. Small insects hovered above the nearly dead grass.

"We'll see about that," Jake said. "I think I've got it licked. Can you turn on the spigot? Slowly?"

Sam went to the back wall and turned the metal knob to full. Water exploded from the sprinkler, dousing Jake as he fell to the ground. Sam laughed hard.

"I knew you were gonna do that." Jake set down the sprinkler and backed away as it sprayed in the other direction.

"Then why'd you ask me to?"

"A preacher wouldn't get far in life if he didn't think people could change." He slapped a wet hand between Sam's shoulder blades and left a trail of droplets on the patio concrete as they headed inside.

They ate a casserole of beans and hamburger, seasoned with mild barbecue sauce and topped with canned biscuits and cheese. Salty, but good. Danny ate two plates full and didn't play with any of it. Sweet tea filled everyone's glasses.

"How are you doing?" Libby asked after some conversation about the dry weather. "Jake tells me a little now and then, but we never see you."

"The mine keeps me busy." Sam looked at the black lines under his remaining fingernails. "But I'm good. Settling into a routine."

"I didn't figure you'd go back after what happened."

"Libby," Jake said.

"It's fine," Sam said. "Really." He held his hand up for everyone to see. "It's healed up, and I can do my job fine." Danny stared with saucer eyes.

"That's probably enough," Jake said.

"Sorry," Sam said.

"No, I meant Danny. It's not polite to stare."

"He didn't mean anything by it," Libby said. Sam wasn't sure if she spoke to him or Jake.

"I'm sorry," Danny said.

"No problem," Sam said, looking at Danny, who seemed to have grown six inches since May. "When you see things you haven't seen before, you stare sometimes." He smiled, and Danny smiled back. "So what happened to your cheek, chief?" Danny glanced at Libby.

"Running around the house, not looking where he was going," Libby said. "It's not like the chair isn't always there."

“Did it bleed?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Danny said, as if it were the coolest thing ever. “A little higher and I might’ve had a black eye.”

“Or lost an eye,” Jake said. “And then how would you watch where you’re going?”

“With the other eye,” Danny said, logically. Sam laughed and Jake smiled.

Halfway through the angel food cake, which Libby drizzled with strawberry sauce, the conversation turned to church. Jake had some ideas on how to increase attendance, but Libby seemed skeptical. The youth group had grown, though, and had a trip to Skate World in Jasper next weekend. Sam had played four corners there in middle school.

“So when did Roger Pirkle start coming here?” Sam asked.

“He and his wife used to go to the Lutheran Church in Petersburg, but it closed down, so they ended up here,” Jake said, between bites of cake. He’d dripped strawberry sauce on his T-shirt.

“Baptist’s a ways from Lutheran,” Sam said.

“All roads lead to Rome.”

“Most roads,” Libby added.

“That’s awfully open-minded,” Sam said, remembering how Jake had surprised him at the bookstore.

“You sound surprised,” Libby said.

“I didn’t mean—” Sam said. “Just—here’s to Rome.” He lifted his glass in a quick toast. Danny attempted to do the same and sloshed sweet tea on the tablecloth.

“Darn it, Danny,” Libby said, dipping her paper napkin into a glass of water and rubbing at the spot. “No Game Boy tonight.” Her tone was soft but pointed, and Danny’s shoulders dropped. Sam wanted to tell him it was fine. That they’d have fun without a Game Boy. But it wasn’t his son or his house. Jake moved part of a biscuit around his plate.

“So Danny, tell me about school,” Sam said. “What grade are you in? Who’s your teacher?”

“I’m in first grade. Mrs. Nicholson’s class.” Sam knew the face. Tight blonde perm, pleasant smile, blue eye shadow.

“You know,” Sam said, leaning toward Danny. “She was my first-grade teacher, too.”

“Nuh-uh!”

“Yuh-huh. Your dad had Mrs. Lamey, I think, but me and Danny both had Mrs. Nicholson.”

“I just told you she was my teacher,” Danny said, as if Sam hadn’t been listening.

“The other Danny,” Sam said. “My brother Danny. Your dad’s brother.”

“Oh. I thought everybody called him Daniel.”

“Only when he was in trouble.” He’d rarely been in trouble. Most of his life, he’d been too sick for it.

“I can understand that,” Danny said seriously. Sam and Jake laughed.

“That’s enough about that,” Libby said, reaching for the empty plates. “Why don’t you go do your homework?”

“Yes ma’am.” He scooted out of his chair and down the hall.

“He’s growing up,” Sam said. He’d matured since May, become more aware than he’d while spitting chicken bones on his plate. Had it only been four months? Sam felt less uncomfortable around him and more protective, seeing more of the old Danny in the new. Same gray eyes. Same pale skin against dark hair.

“You can’t stop it,” Jake said, and then turned toward the kitchen. “Honey, can we do anything for you?”

“Bring me that casserole dish.” Her voice echoed down the hallway. “It needs to soak.”

Sam helped carry dishes to the kitchen, and then stopped to peruse the assorted pictures in the living and dining rooms. Libby kept a typical Midwestern living room, at least in Sam’s limited experience. It felt lived-in, but spruced up with nick-knacks. Hand-made wire sculptures; wood carvings painted in red, white, and blue motifs; assorted souvenirs from vacations to Tennessee and Florida. A formally dressed doll sat in a small rocking chair in one corner, while an antique scoop hung on the wall beside the front door with the words “Ashley Grain Company” across the front. The room smelled of scented candles that had never been lit. The part of him that had left Indiana saw it as too much, like a Cracker Barrel lobby. The part of him that had grown up here enjoyed its charm. Comfortable. Like Granma’s house, minus the Cardinals paraphernalia.

Along one wall stood a long, narrow table, bursting with framed pictures in all shapes and sizes. Sam recognized many people. Several photos of Libby, Jake, and Danny, including one from Danny’s baptism. Sam had missed that. Danny didn’t look much younger in the picture. Had they invited him? Another of Dad and Jake on Grandma’s carport, before the trees behind them had blown away. They each had an arm

around the other. Jake wore a suit and tie, while Dad wore a flannel shirt and one of his stained ball caps from work. Some others of Libby's family, who Sam recognized, but didn't know well. One picture at the back of the table showed a Christmas morning from Sam's childhood. He couldn't tell which year, but the whole family was there. Dad, with bushy hair and a thick black beard. Jake, wearing a Miami Dolphins robe, tall and lanky. Sam, shorter than Jake by a head, wearing a Steelers robe. The robes had been Christmas presents, made of a scratchy material. Danny sat on the floor in a cloth diaper, all baby pudgy and crazy brown hair. It had been lighter when he was small. His tiny belly stuck out as if he'd overeaten, though they would learn later that the distention came from enlarged kidneys. Mom held him upright with one hand, kneeling between Jake and Sam. He hadn't seen a photograph of her in years. In the photo albums at Dad's house, some pages had small, unfaded squares beneath the plastic cover sheets. Here, she knelt with an easy smile on her face beneath large tinted glasses and curly hair Sam remembered mostly from the smell of her shampoo. Not flowery like most, but richer, as if she'd baked all day. Dad's hand rested easy on her shoulder.

Sam picked up the photo and searched for details. The image was grainy, and other than a few memorable ornaments on the tree, he couldn't make much out. His own smile looked forced, and in a flash he remembered how upset he'd been that Jake had gotten the Dolphins robe. Sam had never cared for sports, but he'd liked Dan Marino because Jake did. Mom had gotten him the Steelers one just so they'd both have a football robe. His eyes grew warm and he sat the picture back in its place. Footsteps clicked behind him, and he picked up another picture.

“That’s the first class I ever taught,” Jake said. It took Sam a second to realize he was talking about the picture Sam held.

“Oh yeah?” Sam said, looking closer. Jake had longer hair and stood behind an assortment of teenagers wearing bright shirts and faded jeans tight-rolled at the ankles. Behind them, the high school loomed over them with its gray concrete walls.

“That’s Roger Pirkle’s son.” Jake pointed out a long-faced boy on the left. “Jeff.” He had Roger’s eyes. “Moved to Indy and works for the state now.” Maybe he knew Russ Hume.

Sam looked over the rest of the students and noticed a girl with long red hair, easily the best-looking kid in the group. Perfect skin, great smile.

“Is that her?” Sam pointed her out.

“Who?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Who are you looking at?” Libby asked behind them. Sam’s insides ran cold.

“Oh, nobody,” Jake said. She leaned between them, putting her hand on the picture frame before Sam could replace it.

“Who are we talking about?” she asked. Her grip tightened on the frame. “Jacob, can I see you in the other room?” She turned away, pulling the picture from Sam’s hand. Jake glanced at Sam as he followed her.

“Sorry,” Sam said lamely.

The conversation stayed muffled behind their bedroom door, though the volume grew in bursts. Sam considered just slipping away to his truck. At one point, Libby’s



voice rose, repeating the words “In my house!” twice. Eventually, Danny wandered into the room and sat next to Sam on the overstuffed couch, flipping up the footrest.

“It’s okay,” Danny said. “They do this sometimes.”

Sam had told his younger brother similar things when Dad and Mom would fight over medical bills or treatment options. “They’re worried about you,” he’d say, sitting on the side of Danny’s bed. “We all are.”

“Parents can be strange sometimes,” Sam said now.

Before Danny could reply, Libby stormed down the hallway. “Get your homework,” she said. “We’re going to Grandma and Grandpa’s for a while.”

“Can I bring my Game Boy?”

“Fine. Just get your stuff.” The kid’s moves were impressive.

They were gone in no time, and Sam stood in the living room with Jake, who held the crumpled picture loosely.

“I’m really sorry,” Sam said.

“Funny thing is, I didn’t even realize she was in the picture until you asked.” Jake flipped the photo toward the kitchen table. It spun in the air and landed in the floor. Jake turned and walked back toward his bedroom. Sam followed, not sure what else to do.

“You okay?” Sam said, stopping at the door.

“I’m fine. She does this sometimes. Goes to her folks’ to cool off.” He pulled a drawer open and lifted out a large ball of socks. “Besides, now we can do this.” He lifted a large, swollen sock between them.

“What’s that?”

“Remember Granddad’s cough medicine? The secret ingredient?”

“No way.” Sam smiled.

“Yep. Got to it before Granma did.” He reached into the sock and slid out a half-full bottle of Yellowstone whiskey.

They drank some at the kitchen table, but once the sun dropped, they moved to back patio. Jake turned off the motion sensor, and they sat in the warm moonlight.

“Someday I’d like to preach a sermon on why it’s okay for me to sit on the back deck in broad daylight and drink whiskey,” Jake said. “Baptists are funny. I sat through a lecture in seminary where the professor argued that the wine in the Bible was unfermented grape juice.”

“That’s what you use at church.”

“Sure it is. Can you imagine Baptists drinking real wine?” He took a sip of the whiskey in his plastic cup.

“I’ve seen plenty of Baptists drink worse.”

“Not in church you haven’t. And I get it. Plenty of folks around here with drinking problems.” He sat his cup on the patio table. “Still, there’s enough sins in the Bible without adding to the list.”

“One thing’s for sure. This stuff’s a sin.” His eyes watered as he took a swig. “How long do you think this was in Granddad’s sock drawer?”

“Years, I’d guess,” Jake said. “He only used it for cough medicine, far as I know, and he didn’t get sick much.”

“I’d be afraid to if it meant drinking this.”

Jake poured a little more into Sam’s glass. “Face your fear.”

“You could do the same if you turned the light on out here.”

“I think I’ve faced plenty for one evening.”

A cool breeze braced Sam’s cheeks. In the moonlight and he could see the surrounding houses clearly. Some had lights in their windows, but lots of folks had gone to bed already, even on a Saturday night. Occasionally, headlights slipped between the houses from the next street over. Insects hummed around them, but they wouldn’t be around much longer. October was nearly gone, and the warm weather couldn’t last.

“When was the last time we did this?” Jake said, gesturing at the two of them in the patio chairs.

“I’m not sure we ever have.”

“That’s a shame.”

They had their reasons. When the family had collapsed, it had happened with brutal force. Danny didn’t last long after Sam backed out of the kidney transplant. Mom disappeared just a few days later. No letters. No calls. Once, before he’d perfected his cool distance, Dad told Sam and Jake she left because she couldn’t bear to be reminded of Danny. The rest of them had managed somehow.

“I didn’t know you still had that Christmas picture,” Sam said.

“Libby found it in a shoebox a while back. Said it needed to be out where people could see it.” He took another swig. “I think she likes proof we were normal once.”

“Like her?”

Jake took a deep breath. “She’s got her problems. Most people do.”

“I suppose.” The breeze shifted, and music drifted from somewhere nearby.

“Folks around here like things safe. Predictable.”

“That’s not how life works.”

“So we want it even more. Remember how we prayed when Danny got sick at the end?”

“Yep,” Sam said, forcing even the short syllable. He’d wanted to be a hero, to save his brother’s life. But fear had kept him from it. “I should’ve done more than pray, though.” He took another drink.

“You wanted to. You don’t remember?”

“I was afraid.” His throat ached.

“You were, but you would’ve done it if Mom had let you.”

Sam stared up at the stars. That’s not how he remembered it. He’d volunteered, had the tests done, and then changed his mind.

“Mom didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“She did. You really don’t remember.” Jake swirled the whiskey in his cup. “You should talk to Dad about this stuff.”

“Not likely.”

Sam tried to remember, but the whiskey made his head fuzzy. They’d stood around Danny’s bed, Sam’s chest swollen with guilt. Mom’s faith anchored them, her arms tight around Sam on her lap, and Danny looked forward to the heaven she described. Sam had wanted to believe, had said the words, had prayed for certainty, but when Danny closed his eyes, all Sam knew was that he was gone.

“We wanted a miracle,” Jake said. “Expected one, really. But the time of miracles has passed.” He slapped his cup on the table and poured another finger. “We’ll see Danny again, though.”

“You really believe that?” Sam had wrestled with the possibility his whole life, imagining what he’d say if he saw Danny again. How he’d apologize.

“I really do. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know. Some days. But how can you really know?”

Jake looked into his cup, and then up at the low-hanging moon. “Never said I knew. Said I believed.” He tipped back the cup and drained the whiskey, then stood up, a little unsteady. “That’s enough for me. Gotta preach in the morning.” Sam had forgotten tomorrow was Sunday. “Come listen, if you want.”

“Can’t. I’m already booked.”

## Chapter Twelve

Sam must have written the address down wrong. The building coming into view on his left was clearly a Dollar General Store, or what remained of one. The long rectangular sign still held the outline of the store name, painted over in a dingy white. The structure made it clear: brick walls with a squared-off, brown metal façade. Every smallish town in the Midwest had one. The Dollar General folks must have moved into newer digs elsewhere in Huntingburg. A small crowd of people milled about the parking lot, though it held few cars.

A cool breeze washed over Sam's beard through the open truck window. The weather had turned overnight, and fall crispness hung on the air, full of drying leaves and chimney smoke. He wore sunglasses to ease the mild hangover from Granddad's whiskey. Jake had raised an eyebrow at Sam's decision to skip his home church for one in Spanish. Sam assured him it was a favor, not a theological statement. "Just bring back a report from the other side of the Jordan," Jake said, though he had plenty to deal with on the nearer bank. Libby hadn't come back last night, but Jake assured Sam she was "like that" sometimes.

Because of the warm fall, the trees dotting the streets of Huntingburg seemed confused, or comfortably ambiguous. The oaks held fragile green leaves, while other trees had succumbed to the turmoil of autumn, with oranges, reds, yellows, and violets all competing for attention. A few trees, mostly poplars and sycamores, stood half-bare already, a few brown leaves holding on for dear life.

Sam pulled next to a beat-up Chevy Cavalier. Before he killed the ignition, a round-faced young man put his hand on the door, smiled, and said something in Spanish. Sam didn't understand, but the kid didn't seem to care. His skin was the color of the dying sycamore leaves. A woman with a baby in her arms shouted something and the boy scampered away. She returned her attention to the infant. Everyone shuffled into the Dollar General slowly, sorry to turn their backs on the morning. Stepping from the truck, Sam heard a familiar voice.

"Hola, chochera!" Guaman broke from the group. "How are you?" A little hung over, Sam didn't say.

"Fine." He walked around the truck to get his guitar. "Is this the church?"

"It is. See the sign?" He pointed up at the faded white sign of the front of the building. Closer, Sam could see words hand-painted in letters only a few shades darker than the sign. "Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal," it read in loopy characters.

"How could I have missed that?" He lifted his guitar with his good hand.

"Yes," Guaman said. "Not the best work, but the only paint we had at the time. Can I carry that for you?" He gestured toward Sam's guitar. Sam had come to dislike offers of assistance, but Guaman rarely offered. He probably wanted to appear friendly to his fellow churchgoers.

“Sure. You’re the one who knows where you’re going.”

“Sometimes.” He turned to go in. Pilar walked nearby with Beatriz.

“Morning, Pilar,” Sam said.

“Hello, Torrealta,” she replied, bouncing Beatriz gently against her shoulder.

“You can call me Sam.”

“She likes Torrealta,” Guaman said. “A strong name, she says.”

Shelves still hung on the walls inside, but the freestanding ones had been disassembled and piled in the far corner. Here and there, a decoration sat on a shelf, some overtly religious—crosses or small images of Christ—and others unfamiliar. Several small lizard figures dotted one shelf, neon bright. Folding wooden chairs filled the floor, along with a couple of beat-up church pews like the ones Winslow G.B. had used when Sam was little. The pulpit consisted of an unfinished box of wood with an ornate cross fixed to its front, not quite centered. Unlike Baptist churches, here the pulpit stood off to one side, the central space instead occupied by a few chairs and some musical instruments. A couple of guitars, something like a lute, a violin of sorts, a partial drum set, an electric keyboard with less than fifty keys, a couple of recorder-looking instruments, and an assortment of small percussion items. The room smelled of rich foods and paint. Guaman led Sam to the music area and set his guitar case gently on the ground beside an empty chair.

“Do you want to sit or stand,” Guaman asked.

“It’s easier to sit.”

“Of course. You can sit here. He gestured toward the chair. “I will sit here.” He dropped into the chair next to Sam’s.



“Do you play?” Sam asked. Guaman liked surprises.

“Oh no.” He laughed. “I find the beat, nothing else.” He picked up a tambourine. “But I’ll keep you company.” Another man spoke to Guaman in Spanish. When Guaman turned, Sam sat down and opened his case. With the slide on his finger and the Martin against his belly, he felt more comfortable, as if they shielded him, or helped him blend in. Sam’s left ear filled with the rough melody of a fiddle. He’d expected a sound reminiscent of mariachi music, but the fiddle instead laid out a sort of jig, first articulating a melody, and then winding around it. The meter changed often, depending on where the player wanted to go. Sam glanced at him, a short, stout man sitting in one of the chairs. He held the fiddle like an upright bass, resting it on one knee. A tattered straw hat hung on the other knee. Sam felt overdressed in his khaki pants and collared shirt.

The last few people found seats, but only a few elderly ones sat. Most stood and swayed to the music, their hands held outward, palms up. Pilar had one hand out. The other held Beatriz to her hip. As the fiddle made its way back to the melody, the lute joined in, offering sparse chords over the tune. It began to feel like bluegrass, but less lonesome. Warmer, somehow. Guaman tapped the tambourine softly against the side of his leg, more a hiss than sharp percussion because of missing jingles. The drummer tapped syncopation on the closed high hat, pulling the tune into common time. The congregation clapped along.

Suddenly, the drummer smacked one of the toms and the remaining instruments came in, filling the room with sounds both bright and muddy, bouncing off walls and shelves. Notes caromed up from the parquet floor into the stained drop ceiling, but the instruments kept their personalities. A wind instrument soared above the other parts,

weaving the earlier melody into something new. The player held it against his mouth, more like a small flowerpot than an instrument. Sam's studio ear heard wrong notes and minor dissonances, but the openness of the music, the wide net it cast, forgave them. Sam thought of the "rawness" so many Nashville stars wanted in their songs, only to retreat when it actually got raw.

An elbow prodded his arm and he realized his eyes were closed.

"You play now?" Guaman said over the music as he tapped the tambourine against his leg.

"Guess so." Sam pulled his guitar close and held it with his leg, placing the slide against the strings and strumming a few quiet chords to find the key. Then he strummed hard, doubling the chords around him. They were simple, but not the first-fourth-fifth blues structure he could play in his sleep. Modulations crept in that everyone else anticipated. Occasionally, he struck the wrong chord. He would have been embarrassed in the studio. The melody passed between a few more instruments, finally landing with the lute, where it found a plaintive expression, and then everyone came to a sudden halt. If Sam hadn't recognized a couple of anticipatory head nods, he would have kept playing. Several people in the congregation shouted exclamations. "Alaba al Señor" was the only one Sam could make out, though he had no idea what it meant.

A man wearing a threadbare suit—by far the nicest clothing in the room—walked forward from the back row. His worn leather Bible swung in one hand as he stepped behind the pulpit and smiled at the small crowd. Setting the book down, he began to speak in Spanish. Even if Sam had known the words, he couldn't have kept up with the pace. At first, he spoke in a near-whisper, his tone less confident than his smile. He

stumbled a few times, but as his volume increased, so did his assurance. At one point, he gestured toward Sam and Guaman, who spoke for a few seconds. The only words Sam recognized were “Sam Hightower.”

“Welcome, Sam,” the minister said, stepping over and offering his hand. Sam took it, thankful again that people shook with their right hands, and the minister held it up in a victory gesture, as if they’d been elected to office. Sam smiled, and several voices responded, some saying “welcome,” others offering Spanish greetings. The minister stepped back to the pulpit and began speaking again. He gestured toward Sam a few times while he spoke, as if making a point. Finally, he moved his focus back to the congregation, and a proper sermon seemed to begin.

“Would you like me to translate?” Guaman whispered in his ear.

“No, that’s okay.” There was no need. Without knowing the words, Sam recognized the work. The inflections of the minister’s voice echoed Jake’s Sunday morning cadences, as did the easy give and take between the speaker and his listeners, though the listeners spoke less here. Jake would call it a sweet spirit. As good a term as any. A sublime balance between truth and emotion, elevating the thin sliver of life where they met. Sam felt it sometimes in church, and sometimes in Nashville honky-tonks where he bounced guitar licks around like tennis balls with other musicians. Flashes had come with Julie at the fair, and with Danny at dinner the night before. When he’d seen his family in front of the Christmas tree. More than sentiment. Gut belief.

The minister gestured toward the musicians. The flowerpot played a slower and more persistent tune, nostalgic in its gentle flourishes. Sam watched for an altar call, but instead, a voice rose from the crowd. A small woman, wrinkled and brown, with no teeth.

She raised her hands to the ceiling and spoke loudly in Spanish. It sounded like a plea. Hands reached to her, touching her shoulders, her arms. A voice rose from the front row. A broad-shouldered man with a bristly mustache. He spoke in a quiet, husky voice, his arms spread before him, his head bowed. A woman slipped her arm around his waist and whispered with him. More voices spoke. A teenage boy. A little girl. An elderly man. They prayed for things Sam couldn't understand. Other instruments joined the flute. Sam echoed the melody on the higher strings of his guitar, unsure what else to do. Guaman's voice rose beside him. Sam didn't look up, but the words trembled as he spoke them. Pilar sat in the crowd, rocking Beatriz and watching Guaman. Sam closed his eyes and tried to craft a counterpoint to the flute, but he only heard Guaman's voice, full of hurt. The words hung mostly beyond his grasp. He knew "Dios" and "Jesu Cristo," but nothing else. Sam wanted to touch his shoulder, to give him some of the comfort moving through the room. Instead, he played his countermelody, soothing how he could.

Eventually, the music faded and the minister stepped to the pulpit. People dabbed their eyes and wiped their noses. He spoke somberly at first, but quickly grew cheerful, ending in a jubilant shout. The drums boomed behind Sam for the first time as a full set, and the musicians took off again, this time in a raucous breakdown that passed the tune around like a hot potato. It felt like an Irish dance, and Sam laughed out loud. Guaman looked at him, his eyes red around the rims.

"This is your style, I think."

"Not exactly," Sam said. "But it's growing on me."

“I’m glad.” Other musicians joined in. One of them said something to Guaman. “Victor says it is your turn,” he said, nodding toward Sam’s guitar. The melody had disappeared, and the instruments circled in a vamp.

“I don’t know,” Sam said.

“I don’t believe that.” Guaman nodded toward to the drummer, who banged a rough intro beat.

The slide ran up the strings, falling into the tune. He played carefully at first, trying to reshape the melody as the other musicians did, but soon he started to experiment. His rock background brought more speed to the table than most Nashville musicians could offer, and though producers didn’t like it, he’d kept in practice. The slide gave the speed different qualities. Without fingers to work the frets, the speed came from his strumming hand. He focused on stopping the slide above the frets, and everything around those points faded. His forearm burned, and he learned as he went, finding he could move the melody faster with his wrist than his finger. The other musicians formed a single instrument, forging the beat his tune danced to, ahead one moment, just behind the next. The crowd clapped in rhythm and shouts punctuated the music. He missed a note, but found more to cover it, going where the spirit moved him. The song grew percussive, and he switched back to strumming all six strings, sliding ferociously from fret to fret. The other musicians crept toward resolution. He’d nearly missed it earlier, but now he saw it at a distance and filled the final stretch with a series of runs he’d never played before, imperfect but alive. As the band came down on the final beat, Sam pulled the slide up the strings, mirroring the slide down he’d begun with. His fingers hurt. He couldn’t look up, suddenly aware that he was a stranger here, but before the

reverberations between the shelves stopped, everyone cheered. Sam looked to Guaman for support, embarrassed. Guaman flashed his gold teeth, reflecting the morning light from the storefront windows.

After the service, the men moved the chairs and unfolded a stack of tables while the women swooped in and covered the central table with a smorgasbord of food. Steam rose from much of it, though Sam hadn't seen ovens or warming pans. Most came from the few vehicles parked out front. The dry air grew rife with spices. Some reminded him of Pilar's tamales, rich and aromatic, but other scents were hard to place. A sweet, chocolaty smell mixed with another, sour but not unpleasant. Tortillas, grilled meats, diced potatoes, soups, and several types of rice filled the table beside foods he didn't recognize.

"You should try the aji de gallina, chochera," Guaman said from beside him, his eyes no longer red.

"And that would be what?" Sam said, looking over the table.

"This one." Guaman pointed to chicken in a yellow sauce. "Chili chicken, you would call it. Peruvian food."

"Isn't all of this Peruvian?"

"Very little. They all make the foods they know."

"Of course." Not everyone came from Peru. He saw differences now that he thought to look. Many faces were dark like Guaman's, but others fell somewhere between Sam and his friend, while other had a reddish complexion. "That was silly of me."

“Not silly.” Guaman heaped food on his plate. “I couldn’t say where everyone came from if I didn’t know them. Only that they look more like me than you.”

“So the spicy chicken is good?” Sam reached for the serving spoon.

“Chili chicken,” Guaman said. “Not spicy, but good.”

“Here goes.” Sam scooped some onto a plate.

“Eat plenty. You deserve it. I knew you could play. I didn’t know you could make the guitar sing.” Sam opened his mouth, but found no words. “I’ll find you soon. Now I must help Pilar with the baby,” he said, shuffling off toward his wife, who sat at one of the tables making funny faces at Beatriz. Guaman was Sam’s friend. He hadn’t seen it coming. Would’ve avoided it if he had. He’d preferred aloneness for so long. Its safety. This man from Peru had punched a hole in that safety, and it pleased and frightened Sam. He sat with some men who didn’t speak English. They smiled at him as he tried the chicken. It was delicious.

On the way home, he stopped for a train outside of Huntingburg. As the truck lurched to a halt, something skittered from beneath the seat of the truck. He looked down at the passenger floorboard. His deactivated cell phone lay on the dirty mat. He leaned and picked it up. As the coal cars lurched along the tracks, he flipped the phone open to find a blank screen. Dead battery. The charger was the cab somewhere, but he didn’t look for it. The music he’d played today wouldn’t interest the producer. It had been too rough. Too impossible to capture. And it had made him laugh from sheer pleasure. He couldn’t give it to a producer to be processed. It had been totally new, surprising him in ways he’d though impossible. Giving him a new voice, like the apostles at Pentecost. He had no idea what to do with it.

He didn't notice he'd driven through Arthur until he crossed the bridge into Winslow. The river had dropped from lack of rain, creating small whitecaps wherever a branch or rock jutted above the water. On his left, an older man and two younger ones, maybe his sons, sat on the south bank with lines in the water. Years ago, there hadn't been many fish in the Patoka due to acid runoff from the mines. Maybe things were better. Across the bridge, he took a right to see if Jake's car was home. It wasn't. With no destination, Sam pulled his truck to the side of the road. Instead of walking across to the church and parsonage, he walked into the cemetery. It had once felt vast, but it seemed modest now. A few hundred markers cascaded toward an uneven tree line—the only cemetery in Winslow, and home to assorted denominations as well as a healthy dose of heathens. Winslow G.B. tended it because they'd dug the earliest graves.

Patchy brown grass covered the property, only growing tall and green near a ditch that ran along the west end of the lot. The headstones stood in assorted colors, mostly grays and browns, with some reds and blacks peppered in. Almost all were granite, except in the oldest part of the cemetery, where limestone markers stood at precarious angles. He found a few graves with fresh flowers as he walked, and others with bright, artificial ones. Some held withered blossoms in their vases, remnants of Decoration Day or the Fourth of July. Sam had family in three different parts of the cemetery, and he knelt in front of the first. The marker, a large rectangle, read "Hightower" at the top, and below that "William" on one side and "Flora" on the other. Granddad and Granma. Seeing Granma's name on the stone while she watched TV Land reruns on her couch seemed strange, but she'd once told him it was cheaper this way. The engraver only had



to fill in the year when she passed. Granddad's flowers shone the brightest, as Sam knew they would. Granma took cemetery decoration seriously.

He looked for the next batch of family, but couldn't remember their location. Granma's people, the Collinses, were buried somewhere near the trees. He didn't even know their Christian names, though he had vague recollections of Granma's mom, whom he'd only known as Granny for the few years their lives had overlapped. He stood apart from the lengthening shadows for a while, the clear sun hot on his head and shoulders, but his sweat turned cold in the October chill. Far to his left, someone else stood at a marker, holding a droopy bundle of flowers.

Sam walked the cemetery for half an hour before walking toward the ditch. Just before it, where the grass turned from brown to green, he'd find the marker. He took a circuitous route, passing an assortment of Pike County names: Butrum, DeJarnett, Capehart, Satkamp, Deffendol, Beadles. He knew these names, and some brought faces to mind, even if they weren't the ones over which he stepped. He'd gone to school with a Satkamp girl, the smartest person in his class. The breeze carried the faint smell of the river as it tugged fragile leaves from the trees.

Danny's grave stood before him. Beyond it, green grass fell toward the ditch, but around the marker it was still brown, though well kept. No doubt Granma and Jake had given it extra attention. The blades crunched under his shoes as he stepped toward it and knelt. The plot held two markers, both on the left side. The small one, taller than it was wide, read "Daniel William Hightower," and below that "Loving Son and Brother." In smaller letters at the bottom, the dates of his birth and death. Almost eight years old. The larger one on the right looked like Granddad and Granma's, with "Hightower" chiseled

across the top. The two lower names were “Jesse” and “Marie.” The only place Sam could still find Mom and Dad’s names together. They’d placed the stone shortly after Danny’s death, because Mom had wanted to be certain they buried her next to Danny when the time came. Dad had tried to tell her that the cemetery trustees kept a map. That no one would be buried there but them. Mom hadn’t believed him, and though they hadn’t had the money, Dad had arranged for the stone to be placed. It appeared one day months after Mom had left. On sunny mornings, the larger stone cast its shadow protectively on the smaller one. In the late autumn light, though, Danny’s stone cast the shadow, not quite reaching the larger one.

The rest of the plot stood empty except for cornerstones nearly covered with grass, but part of it was Sam’s. When Dad had reserved the plot, he’d gotten enough space for himself and Mom, Danny, and Jake and Sam, along with their future wives. Most people assumed even back then that one of the spaces would go to Libby. He looked at the bare patches of ground for a while, imagining the hole dug and the cheap tent erected for his funeral. As a teenager, he’d imagined a stone carved with the opening notes of “Stairway to Heaven,” and he smiled now at the ridiculous thought. He still liked the idea, though, of making the musically illiterate stand puzzled before his grave.

It had rained the night before Danny’s funeral, and the ground between the street and the grave turned to mud, covering everyone’s shoes and pant cuffs in clayey earth. Old Pastor Ennis had tried mightily to preach a sermon offering hope, but there had been nothing uplifting about burying a child. “Suffer the little children to come unto Me,” Pastor Ennis had said, but Sam’s young ears had only heard “suffer.” Jake and Mom cried so hard that he stopped more than once as Dad tried to comfort them. Sam sat next

to Granddad and Granma, staring at the short casket. Granma wrapped her arm around him when they stood for prayer, but her hand grazed the scar on his abdomen, reminding him how he'd failed his brother. Pastor Ennis spoke of God wiping away all tears, but Sam had offered none.

Ruddy orange light filled the western sky by the time Sam got back in his truck. The gas gauge had been on empty since Huntingburg, so he turned right onto Main Street and headed into town. An unusual number of people filled the sidewalks, mostly kids, and when he saw one dressed as a pirate, he remembered it was Halloween. He watched them as he pumped gas, an assortment of witches, robots, and hobos traipsing toward bags of candy. He'd never trick-or-treated in Winslow. Mom had preferred to chauffeur them around to the various houses in Arthur, and they'd found pieces of candy stuck between the back seat cushions for weeks afterward. He never trick-or-treated after Mom left, other than some Halloween pranking with friends in high school. Now he watched two kids across the street. A girl wore a fairy costume covered with sparkles that glittered red in the sunset. The other kid wore a sheet—a bargain basement ghost in tennis shoes. They walked up the exterior steps of the old Patoka Apartments, a brown brick box with stairs like fire escapes. He'd never been in one of them, but the tight spacing of the doors suggested they weren't large. The kids knocked on a door, and when it opened, they shouted "Trick or treat!" to an older woman with curlers in her hair. As she stuffed their bags full of candy, Sam's gaze wandered across the face of the building and its small yard. In the reddening light, he barely made out a cockeyed sign stuck in the grass reading "For Rent." The pump clicked off, and the sharp smell of gasoline filled the air as he put the nozzle back in its slot.

#

Dad didn't argue when Sam shared his plans. "Seems like the right idea," he said, sitting at the table with his Pepsi can full of chew spit. The reasons for moving out had piled too high. Sam would never adjust to early mornings, and Dad's coffee-gulping sarcasm at 5 a.m. didn't help. Besides, work was Dad's natural state, not just at the mine, but at home. He'd get off work in the afternoon, take a shower, and go climb on his tractor or mend a spot in the fencerow. Sam was the opposite. He took pride in his work, but didn't look forward to it. When he came home, he enjoyed the path of least resistance. He'd help Dad when needed, but he preferred a shower, some food, and the quiet basement where he could watch TV or practice guitar. He imagined Julie in the basement with him, but she couldn't bring herself to spend time there. "I like your dad," she said. "But he's my boss." Sam argued that Dad would stay upstairs. "You really think I want to hear his footsteps while I'm putting the moves on you?" she replied.

All these reasons led to the clearest one. The transition was over. He'd moved in with Dad to save money and tread water until the next phase of things. Until he could get to California. But he mined coal now, like his dad and his granddad and his great-great-uncle Revis, and coal miners didn't live with their parents.

The move went smoothly. Everything Sam owned fit in the cab of his truck, with the exception of his guitar, which went in the bed to make room for everything else. Two armfuls of clothes, a couple of guitar books, two pairs of work boots, a small TV he'd bought for his room downstairs, a plastic bag of toiletries, and a Jimmy Page poster that Julie had bought him for their two-month "anniversary." She'd put the word in air-quotes when she said it, so he didn't know how seriously to take it. He found a furniture store in

Jasper with reasonable delivery rates, so he dropped some of his bankroll on a couch, a bed, and a small kitchen table and chairs. The apartment wouldn't have held much else. One bedroom, an L-shaped living room/dining room/kitchen area, and a bathroom so small Sam had to lean down in the shower to get his hair wet. But it was his place, carrying a weight of permanence he hadn't felt in years. He spent his first night in the middle of November and celebrated by walking to the Main Street Market, where he bought a TV dinner and a box of chocolate donuts. Then he walked to the other side of the river and bought a six-pack of Busch Light at the liquor store. He spent the evening with his feet propped up on his fancy reclining couch watching reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Cheers*, and *Night Court*.

The next night, a Saturday, he invited Julie over. Her ex had the boys that weekend, so she showed up around six o'clock carrying a bottle of champagne with a twist-off cap.

"Classing up the joint already," Sam said, taking the bottle and her jacket. He'd gotten much better at handling such items with seven fingers.

"I would've done that just fine without the bottle." She winked at Sam as he turned to the tiny fridge. "Nice place," she said, looking the place over. "My aunt used to live in one of the ground-floor units, but hers smelled like cat pee."

"This one just smells like generic old person. With just a whiff of overcooked meth."

"You're terrible."

"It's fine. It's just drifting up from the downstairs apartment."

On TV, the weatherman warned that rain would finally arrive this week.

“Least we’ll have mud at both ends of the mine for a while,” Julie said, sitting on the couch and trying it out. She flipped the recliner lever a few times as if in a quick-draw contest.

“Great. Hard enough already to keep my boots on down there.” He’d learned to tie them as tight as he could to keep the muck at the face from swallowing them whole. “Stop that.” He leaned over and put his hand on hers around the lever. “Let’s not wear out the furniture the first week I’ve got it.”

“There go my plans.” She wore a tight pair of faded jeans and a silky green top with three buttons undone. When she stood, her perfume filled the room. “I guess I’d better stay off the rest of the new stuff, then.”

“Let’s not get carried away.” Sam pulled her toward the poorly-framed bedroom door.

“Don’t you want to eat dinner first?”

“It’s frozen,” Sam said. “It’ll keep.”

Afterward, they lay on his bed for a while. The baseboard heater clicked and wheezed, and they soon found themselves bundled up in the bed’s overstuffed quilt to fight off the November chill. He felt himself drawing warmth from her body. She mingled with the apartment’s permanence, and he liked the feeling. He wanted to tell her. To ask if she felt it, too. If this small patch of Indiana was his home again, he wanted to share it with her.

“You’re warmer than me,” he said.

“Packing on calories for the winter.” She brushed hair out of her face, a blur in the faint light coming through the small bedroom window. It faced the elementary school,

with its dusk-to-dawn lights. Sam had meant to get a blackout curtain. She wrapped her legs around his. “You’d better do the same. You’re freezing.”

“I’ve always been cold-blooded. So Granma says. I guess I used to sleep in her bed when I was a kid and my cold toes would wake her out of a dead sleep.”

“That’s attractive.”

“She got used to it. We’d sleep there on nights when Dad worked and Mom stayed at the hospital with Danny. I’d sleep with Grandma and Jake slept with Granddad. They couldn’t put us in a bed together because we’d fight.”

“Like good brothers. Danny was the youngest, right?” Sam nodded. Her hand went to his abdomen, near his scar. His muscles tightened.

“Yeah. We spent a lot of nights at Granma and Granddad’s after it happened, too.”

“My boys like staying with my folks. More than with me, usually.” She brushed her hair away again. “Helps that they’re just across the yard.”

“I like your boys.” He’d chatted with them a couple of times since he’d first come to Julie’s trailer, and they seemed to like him, too. “They’re like Jake and me at that age.” They’d played video games together a lot, too, mostly *Mario Brothers* and *R.C. Pro-Am*.

“I feel sorry for your parents.”

“You really shouldn’t.” He reached out to brush her hair away. His heart pounded. It felt like the right time. “You know, if you wanted us to do something with the kids sometime, I’d be okay with that.”

“I don’t know. That’s a whole can of worms.”

“Is it?” Sam ran his fingers along her arm. “I’m not talking family dinners. Just, I don’t know, doing something. They know I’m around. They seem to like me.”

“It’s not that. They like you. I know that.” She rolled onto her back, pulling her arm away and taking enough blanket that he felt cool air on his backside.

“So they know me and they like me. I guess I don’t see the can or the worms.”

“Jason’s been spending more time with the boys lately,” Julie said. “I don’t want to confuse them.”

“Oh.” He scooted closer to recover some of the blanket. Julie tensed. “I mean, that’s fine. Obviously. I think they’re old enough to not be confused, though.” He thought of himself and Jake after Mom left. “Kids can figure out more than we give them credit for.”

“I think I know my kids better than you do.” She got up from the bed and took the blanket with her. Sam lay naked, stung by her words and the cold air, then fished his pants from the floor and pulled them on.

“I know that,” he said. “Let me start again here.” He buttoned his pants and grabbed his shirt, following her into the front room. “I like you. I like your boys. They don’t seem to hate me. Can you see where this is going?”

“I get it.” She fished a smoke from her cigarette wallet and lit it. He had a nonsmoking lease. “But Jason’s their dad. Their father.” She hit the last word as if it had a completely different meaning than “dad.” “I don’t want to complicate things just when he’s coming around more.” There it was. “Spending time” and “coming around” weren’t the same thing.

“Coming around to your house?”



“He’s their dad.” She said it as if Sam were mentally deficient. “We’re not gonna meet on neutral ground.” Sam stared at her, sitting on his new couch, wrapped up in his new quilt, blowing cigarette smoke into both. Her eye makeup had smeared. Sam’s T-shirt dangled from the two fingers of his left hand. He leaned against the wall. It creaked beneath his weight.

“Tell me that when he comes over, he only goes as far as the living room. That he’s only there to see the boys,” Sam said.

“Fuck you.” She stood and threw off the quilt. Sam looked at the floor as she walked past him, naked, into the bedroom, ash falling from her cigarette onto the carpet. Fumbling for her clothes in the dark, she knocked Sam’s guitar case off its stand. The strings buzzed inside as it hit the floor.

“Would you watch what you’re doing?” he said. “I have lights, you know.” He flipped them on and she squinted as she pulled her underwear on.

“Why are you being an asshole?” she said, snatching her bra from under the bed.

“I’m really not,” Sam said, hoping he was right. “Just stop for a second, okay?” She slapped her hands to her side and stood in his bedroom in bra and panties. He leaned in the doorway, shirt still in hand. “Just tell me what’s going on.” He tossed the shirt over his shoulder. “If you’re getting back with your ex, I’d like to know.” He pictured Jason Kirby, standing over him at the fair as he lay bleeding.

She sat on the edge of the bed. “I don’t know what’s going on.” She took a long drag off the cigarette and more ashes fell. “We’re not getting back together. Not him and me.” She fished her shirt from the wadded bed sheet and twisted it in her hands. “But

he's their dad, and you should see their faces when we're in the same room together. It's like Christmas morning for them."

"So he spends the night." She looked up at him. "Never mind. Not my business."

"It is. And he does. He has. Twice." She slipped her arms into the shirtsleeves and started buttoning, keeping the cigarette balanced in her fingers. "I wanted to tell you, but I have fun with you. A lot of fun. Like when we were in school." She stopped. Her bottom lip quivered. "He doesn't make me feel like that. I don't even think I love him." She wiped at her eyes. "But I love my boys." Her lips puckered and a tear or two dropped, but she swallowed hard. "You don't ever plan a mess like this. But Jesus, it sure can wreck an evening." She laughed, giving up momentarily on her shirt buttons.

"I'm sorry." He sat down beside her. "I didn't mean to start this." He put his hand on her knee, unsure if putting it around her shoulders would be too much.

"Bound to happen." She stood. "I should go."

"You don't have to."

"I think I do."

He didn't get to sleep until after midnight. He wasn't angry. She'd made sense. Hadn't gotten hysterical. Of course her kids' happiness should come before hers. Besides, they'd spent most of the fall avoiding commitment. PG dates, careful avoidance of most family. But she'd talked to him. With him. Treated him like a whole man when he didn't feel like one. Laughed at his jokes and held his hand during movies. Given him something to look forward to. She'd *been* something to look forward to. She hadn't said anything was over. Just that the things were complicated. They could go on doing what they were doing. Avoiding her kids and his dad. He had the apartment now. They could

do what they liked. But he kept coming back to Jason Kirby waking up in her bed. Walking out the door to an easy interaction with his kids. Playing Xbox with them. Killing zombies or Russians or whatever. Sam lay in bed, listening to the stray dogs around Winslow howling at the moon, and finally fell asleep under the smoky quilt.

## Chapter Thirteen

By mid-November, Pike County had its first snow, and then its second. One snow rarely fell on top of another because of the mildness of Ohio Valley winters, but it happened sometimes. This time, it left nearly a foot of snow on the ground. After the second snowfall the mercury rose, turning most unpaved surfaces into brownish muck, and making the mine property barely navigable. The crew laid gravel over the most frequented pathways after two mantrips got bogged down, and Roger suspended most outdoor work, which suited the topsiders fine. Temperatures hung in the high thirties outdoors. The mine stayed warmer by almost forty degrees at the face. Shortly after the thaw, unseasonable rains rolled in from the south, swelling the local lakes and strip pits, and driving the Patoka out of its banks. Even Granma couldn't remember such strange weather in November, as she told Sam whenever he stopped to see her.

The miners continued to work underground because it was their job, and because bills came due whether it rained or not. Some took more sick days, but not Sam, who worked not only for his paycheck, but to maintain the respect Dad had finally given him. "Nice work on the loader," he said one day, passing through the break room. "Almost as good as your girlfriend." He disappeared without breaking stride, leaving Sam to

luxuriate in the near-compliment. Julie hadn't been nearby, thankfully. They'd spoken little in the weeks since she'd left his apartment, though she glanced at him sometimes as their loaders passed in the dark passages. He wanted to approach her, but work rarely stopped, and they never found themselves alone.

Everyone seemed pleased with the progress at the face except Dad, who paced every passage and pillar within a quarter mile. He and Roger barely spoke, except for shouting matches in the office, because of the increased presence of Charlie Ross and other suits from Black Stallion and CRN. Dad stayed tight-lipped around the crew, but scuttlebutt at the face said a decision was in the works regarding Friendship's profitability.

"It can go two ways," Big John said one day. "Either they open their eyes and see there's still good, deep cuts to be made left and right, or they look at the coal coming up on the beltline and see nothing but red ink."

"Ain't no decisions being made," Gideon responded as they sat around the lunch table. "They just looking for ways to get us to work faster and cheaper. Companies do it in West Virginia, and they do it here." He gestured around the table at the crew. "Biggest expense is sitting right here. Salary, benefits. Shit, you see how that company man watches us. 'Why's that fella taking time to scratch his ass?' he's thinking every time I get an itch."

Big John argued, but Gideon sounded more certain. Ball-Hoot sat next to him, barely fitting in the chair, and nodded at his brother's words. They didn't say much about West Virginia, but from what Sam gathered, mining didn't get much worse in America. Sometimes, Guaman would be at the table for these discussions, and Sam waited for him

to speak up. To explain how it could be worse. But Guaman just sat, listening and munching the food Pilar packed for him. Anytime they found themselves in a mantrip together, or in the same area during downtime, they'd talk about little Beatriz, or Sam's guitar playing. "We must have you back," Guaman would say, and Sam agreed to make another appearance before Christmas.

Since the church, Sam practiced two hours most nights, mapping out the gritty sound he'd uncovered. He'd replaced the low nut on his guitar with a higher one, raising the strings for slide work, and even spent a Saturday in Evansville scoping out electrics. The possibilities thrilled him. Without professional obligations, music had become fun again.

Overall, life had grown into a comfortable routine, in and out of the mine. He still hated the early mornings, but by the time he had his second cup of coffee and sat in the mudroom with the crew, he felt valuable, as if the whole enterprise needed him for success. A half-truth, certainly. He'd replaced Jimmy, and if the mine stayed open, someone would replace him someday. On those gray mornings, though, he enjoyed sitting with the crew as Dad spoke to them.

By the last Friday in November, with corporate nudges and few equipment problems, the production numbers ran high. They hit their seven cut goal most days and even got eight a few times. As the loading team, Sam and Julie learned to read each other's minds, knowing instinctively when to swing around the corner to the continuous miner just as the other pulled away. Yesterday, they'd extended the beltline again just to keep pace. Now Sam passed Dad as he wound the loader through passages. He waved, but Dad's face was hard as steel. He'd had a fresh row with Roger in the office after the

morning meeting. (“Those two just need to beat the shit out of each other and get it over with,” Brick had said on the ride down to the face. “Twenty bucks on Jesse,” Big John had said immediately.) Sam dropped his eyes from Dad to focus on the turn ahead, but as soon as he cut right, a hard tug beneath the loader jerked it to a stop. Coal skittered from the loader onto the passage floor.

“The hell?” he muttered, but knew what had happened before he got out of his seat. Someone had moved the continuous miner’s power cable out of its normal rut so that it sat higher off the ground, catching on the underside of the loader. Thicker than a sapling, the cable ran juice to the miner from topside. They’d extended it when they moved the beltline. Now it lay on the grimy floor of the passage, a deep gash through its top half, exposing 950 volts. Knowing the danger, he crawled back in the cockpit of the loader, worked the cable loose, and pulled further down the passage.

When he killed the engine, silence surrounded him. Without the continuous miner running, the face stood quiet. Voices shouted in the distance. “How the hell should I know?” Brick’s voice echoed. Another fuzzy voice answered. By the time Sam got back to the sliced cable, Dad stood on the opposite side.

“You do this?” he asked, standing a short distance from the exposed cable, watching it like he watched wounded deer when they used to hunt together.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Must’ve got moved yesterday and I didn’t see it.” Dad looked from Sam to the cable.

“Well, shit.” He raised his radio to his mouth. “Fireboss to topside. Anybody minding the store?” A short burst of noise replied. “Need you to kill power to the miner.” Another burst. “Don’t worry about that, just kill it.” A shorter burst, and then silence.

Sam stepped toward Dad. “Stay put,” Dad said. “Wait for the all clear. Wet ground like this, bastard could fry you without even touching it.” They stood, Dad flitting his eyes between Sam and the cable. Sam’s helmet outlined Dad against the gray rock dust on the pillar behind him, black-and-white like one of the photos on the office wall. Even from a distance, the coal-filled lines on his face stood out. Sam wondered if he looked the same to Dad.

The radio barked to life. “Got it, thanks topside,” Dad said into the walkie. “Son, go get me the electrical kit out of the storage locker.” Dad eased up to the cable and tapped it gently with the toe of his boot. His shoulders relaxed. “You gonna get that kit or not?”

“I’m sorry about the cable. I didn’t see it.”

“Cables get cut.” Dad looked down at it. “But it’s not gonna get fixed if you don’t get that kit. Bring Gideon, too. He’s got steadier hands for wiring than me.”

Sam jogged back to the break room. Most of the crew sat at the table. “Anybody know which locker the electrical kit’s in?” he asked.

“Uh oh,” Brick said. “Somebody needs to watch where they’re going.” Several of them laughed.

“Yeah,” Sam said, “I know how much you all hate sitting on your asses.”

“Ooh, Sammy with the zinger,” Big John said between bites of a donut.

“It’s over here,” Julie said, standing up and walking to the furthest locker from the table. “Least, that’s the last place I saw it.” Sam waited while she sorted through the locker. “Jesus, fellas,” she yelled. “Would it kill you guys to keep things organized?”

“Might,” Brick said.



“Here you go.” She pulled a clear plastic box from the cluttered shelves. “Should be everything you need.”

“Thanks.” Sam put his hand on her arm for a split second.

“No problem.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t sweat it. I’ve done it myself.”

“Get a room,” Big John said.

“Blow me,” Julie said, turning back to the table. Big John went back to his donuts, and Sam smiled at Julie.

“Gideon,” he said, looking to the two brothers at the far end of the table. “Dad wants you to come patch the wire.”

Gideon rose from his bag of hot fries and slapped Ball-Hoot on the back of the head.

“Those better be there when I get back,” he said, pointing at his snack. Hoot smiled and eased his hand closer to the bag. “Don’t think I can’t take you.” He grabbed a pair of gloves and followed Sam.

The repair didn’t take long, maybe half an hour, but the down time meant one less cut today. Still, Dad didn’t seem upset. While Gideon and Dad fixed the cable, Sam manned the repair kit, handing them whatever they needed as they chatted.

“There’s lots of reasons I’m glad we don’t blast anymore,” Gideon said as he twisted a wire cap, “but this ain’t one of them.”

“We blasted the first mile or so here,” Dad said. “Back in the eighties, when continuous miners were too expensive for shitholes like this.” He held a flashlight on Gideon’s hands, which moved swiftly over the cable.

“You hand me the tape?” Gideon asked. “The little one.”

“Sure thing.” Sam tossed him the smallest roll.

“Much obliged.” No one else around here spoke like that. Not even Guaman. Ball-Hoot probably did, when he spoke at all. “There a worse thing in a mine than a windy shot?” Gideon asked Dad.

“Dead fuse,” Dad said. “Not much else.” Gideon grinned. Sam had no idea what they were talking about.

“I was the last shooter in this mine,” Dad said. “Can’t say I was sorry to leave it behind.”

“No,” Gideon said. “Don’t suppose you would be. Never had the nerve for it myself. I was always happy to bolt.”

“Shit,” Dad said, “now *you* ’ve got the most dangerous job in the mine.” The flashlight beam shuddered as he laughed.

“True enough,” Gideon said. “But it’s what I know.”

“What’s a shooter?” Sam asked.

“Just a job back in the blasting days,” Dad said.

“Just a lousy job,” Gideon said. “Your daddy used to carry a bag of dynamite on his back.”

“What?”

“You learn to step careful,” Dad said.

“Damn right you do,” Gideon said. “You never told your boy about shooting?”

Dad shook his head. “Never came up.”

“I’ve seen that job wear people down.” He bit through a piece of tape and wrapped it around another wire. “Or blow them up.”

“Just carrying dynamite around?” Sam said.

“Shooters don’t just carry dynamite,” Gideon said. “Driller finishes up, shooter carries a bag of boomsticks up to the face, wires it with blasting caps and shooting cable, sticks it in the holes, then backs the cable out real slow.”

“Did they bolt the roof first?” Sam asked.

“Sometimes,” Dad said.

“Anyway,” Gideon continued, “they’d do a methane check, because you don’t wanna ignite a gas pocket. Blow the whole crew up.” He tore another piece of tape.

“Shooter walks the cable around the corner, shouts ‘fire in the hole’—”

“Three times,” Dad interjected.

“—and then blows the shit out of the coal face.”

“How’d you get the coal out?” Sam asked. “Loaders?” He glanced at his own loader, sitting idle while they fixed the cable.

“Not like those,” Dad said. “Smaller versions sometimes. Sometimes shovels.”

“At the face,” Sam said. “Without roof bolts.”

“Sometimes.”

“I seen a shooter once,” Gideon said, “get blowed into Jell-O.” He stuck a wire cap between his teeth. “Never did find out what happened.” The words came out muffled around the cap.

How long had Dad been a shooter? How many mornings had he left his wife and boys at home asleep while he handled high explosives? As a kid, Sam hated to wake up with Dad already gone. How much more would he have hated it if he’d know this?

“Now hand me that big son of a bitch,” Gideon said, pointing at the electrical kit. It came out “sumbitch.” Sam handed Gideon the largest roll, bright yellow and thicker than the rest. Gideon rolled several layers around the repaired gash, and then dropped the cable back to the ground. He and Dad moved to opposite ends of the cable.

“Sam, grab the middle,” Dad said. Together, they finagled the cable back to the side of the passageway. “That oughta do it.” Dad dropped his end. Sam and Gideon did the same, and the cable fell into the shallow trough that usually held it.

“Easy peasy,” Gideon said. “Especially for a bolter and shooter.”

“Fireboss to topside,” Dad said into his walkie. “All clear down here. Send the juice.” A burst of staticky words again. “Yeah, don’t work too hard.” He latched the radio to his belt.

“Lot of blasting in West Virginia these days?” Dad asked Gideon. In the distance, the continuous miner kicked back on.

“Not anymore. Least not underground. Anybody can afford a second- or third-hand continuous miner these days.”

“Got family back that way?” Dad asked. The vibrations of the miner rose through Sam’s boots.

“Not much. Some cousins and sister. Married her off before we left.”

“To a miner?” Dad asked.

“Not hardly. To a dentist, of all things.” He laughed. “Me and Hoot keep saying we’re gonna go back home and get our teeth fixed. Been here four years, though, and—” He stopped. Both he and Dad turned their heads toward the face. The continuous miner sounded wrong somehow. The dull grind of the drill bits grew into a kind of roar. Shouts

echoed down the passages, and the fluorescent glow on the plastic sheets flickered several times.

“Jesse,” Gideon said. “We better—”

“Shhh,” Dad said, waving a sharp hand at Gideon and Sam as the lights flickered out completely. “Stay put. I’m gonna—” The rumble grew louder and a black shape roared into the tunnel, barely visible in their helmet lights. For an instant, it looked like a loping animal, and then the water hit Sam at his knees and tipped him into the wall behind him. His helmet hit hard, flying off in the rushing water. Its light hurtled down the passageway as the water pulled him to the ground. Icy tendrils slid inside his clothing, and he fought the urge to gasp for air while underwater. He opened his eyes to search for light, but they filled with an instant and terrible burning. When he snapped them shut again, coal particles and rock dust ground against the back of his eyelids. The current dragged him down the passage, his feet unable to find traction. His lungs ached for air. He swung his arms, searching to find a finger hold. For a terrifying moment he felt nothing, and then the one good finger of his left hand scraped along a wall, catching a rough edge. His feet went out from under him entirely, and he hung diagonally, bouncing in the current like a windsock. He lifted his head above the water and took a deep breath, choking on the grit in his mouth. He coughed, but took in air. He couldn’t see anything, and had no idea where to look for Dad and Gideon.

Terror overtook him so completely that he almost let go of the rock. His finger ached, and he fought the current with his good arm, grabbing hold with both hands to strengthen his grip. As he reached, he realized he’d latched onto the rock at a corner, where the main passage met a crosscut. He swung his feet back toward the ground for

leverage to spin himself into the side passage. In the darkness and rushing water, he lost his sense of up and down, unsure whether his feet moved to the floor or ceiling. His hands and forearms burned, and the wet coal crumbled under his fingers. Then his left toe hit something hard. He pushed against it, relieving his arms, and swung both legs down. He struggled against the current, but lost his footing. His left hand slipped as he tried a second time, and this time he spun hard into the side passage, wrenching his back and driving the air from his lungs.

Total darkness. His back rested against a wall, burning from the twist it had taken. He stood, and rushing water pressed against him, holding him in place. Reaching up, he found the roof three or four inches above him. Water rose to the middle of his thigh. He stood in an air pocket of, what, three feet? He fought the urge to shiver.

“Dad!” He barely heard himself over the rushing water. “Dad! Where are you? Help! Dad!” The grit in his throat choked him again, and the cold water rose higher on his legs. “Dad! Gideon! Can you hear me?” He blinked water from his eyes, looking for any sign of light. Finally, a dim half-circle danced on the wall in front of him.

“Dad! Dad!” He couldn’t form other words. A voice echoed in response, but Sam couldn’t understand it. His pulse boomed in his ears. The words grew louder, and he pieced together “Don’t move!” and “Coming!”. He shouted again, and the half-circle grew fuller. Whoever moved toward him had turned a corner into the worst of the current. The light leapt up and down on the wall, briefly disappearing. Sam shouted again, “Over here, in the crosscut!” Dad hurled himself out of the current and against the wall facing Sam. He stood up, his light giving Sam his first good look at the water. It

rushed past on both sides of their protected alcove, whipping up gray foam that contrasted against its blackness.

“You okay?” Dad shouted over the noise. He was soaked from head to toe, and blood ran down one side of his face. A coil of rope hung around his shoulder. “Dammit, son, you okay?” He blinked as blood ran into his eye.

“I think so. I lost my helmet.” He reached up, running a hand through his wet hair. “Gideon?”

“Over there.” Dad gestured at the crosscut behind Sam. “Can you move?” He looked at the water pressing against Sam.

“I think so. Yeah, I can. Where we going?”

“Just stay close.” Dad pushed across the water to Sam’s side of the passage. He had a deep gash above his eyebrow.

“That looks nasty.”

Dad reached up and touched the wound, looking at the blood on his fingers. “Don’t worry about me. Just do what I say.” He wrapped his hand around the rope at his shoulder. “I’m gonna cross to the next side cut. You stay here. I’ll toss you the rope.”

Dad stepped into the rushing water, leaning into the current to keep from falling over. With every step, his helmet light juddered across the walls. A few feet from the next opening, he dropped to his knees and toppled into the water. Sam opened his mouth to shout, but nothing came out. He started to move, but Dad’s head and shoulders shot back above the water just past the far edge of the crosscut. He pawed at the wall, finding the corner, and pulled himself into the delicate safety of the passage. They stood on opposite walls of the same long hall, water rushing between them.

“Still with me?” Dad shouted. Sam only saw the helmet light, but the voice behind it sounded tired and afraid.

“Still here,” Sam said. The water churned up a strong, oily smell, washing the rock dust away from the walls and floor. Dad fiddled furiously with the rope. He stopped after a moment, untied it, and started over.

“Shit,” he said.

“I can cross like you did,” Sam said, wanting to help.

“You keep your ass over there,” Dad barked without looking up. Eventually, he lifted the rope and pulled at the knot with both hands. “Okay.” He sounded satisfied. “Now grab this when I throw it.” He reared back one arm. Sam’s mind flashed to pitch and catch on a hot summer day. He’d missed nearly all of Dad’s throws.

The rope slapped Sam on the shoulder, and he grabbed with both hands. His good hand missed it entirely, but his left index finger hooked the loop Dad had tied. It slipped, but he closed his thumb and pulled it to his chest.

“Okay, good,” Dad said. “Now put it around you, under your arms.” Sam barely got it in place before Dad yanked the slipknot tight. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Okay, get over here.” Sam took a deep breath and waded into the current. He tipped to his right, nearly falling, but Dad held the rope taut, and Sam anchored himself with it. A few more steps, and he landed safe against the wall with Dad.

“You all right?” Dad grabbed Sam’s arms and pushed them up to slip the rope off.

“Fine,” Sam said.



“Take this.” He slapped a compact rubber flashlight into Sam’s good hand. “Now stand here and don’t move.” He swung Sam around to his other side. The jagged wall bit into Sam’s back.

“Ow,” he said, but Dad had already turned away.

“Okay, Gideon,” Dad shouted. “Here it comes.”

“Ready when you are, boss.” Another light flickered from the next crosscut. Dad hurled the rope further this time, and when it went taut, Dad pulled to keep it that way. After a minute or so, Gideon rolled into the passage with them, soaked to the bone and breathing hard.

“Think the miner busted through to something?” Gideon said, standing with a hand against the wall.

“Gotta be,” Dad said. “Nowhere else this water comes from.” He looped the rope back into his hands.

“I gotta get to the face,” Gideon said. “Get Hoot.”

“No chance,” Dad said. “Water’s rising. Current’s too strong.” Gideon opened his mouth. “Refuge chamber at the face. He’ll be fine.” Gideon’s mouth closed, but his eyes blazed. “We’ll get to ours, he’ll get to his. That’s how it works. Now let’s move. Chamber’s three more cuts over.” Dad breathed hard, winded after pulling them both. “With any luck, the current’s better away from center.” Sam’s toes were numb, and his breath puffed white in the helmet beams.

Dad plunged into the next stream of water. It looked less violent than the first, but Dad moved slower. He stayed above water, but stood for a long time between lunges

forward. When he finally made it across, he leaned against the wall a while before he spoke. His breath burst out in front of him like a steam engine.

“Sam.” He turned toward them. “You ready?”

“I am. Are you?” He didn’t look ready.

“Shut up and get that rope on.”

Gideon gave a flat chuckle behind him. “Best do as your daddy says.”

Sam slid the rope over his shoulders, doubting whether Dad could hold him if he slipped. He stepped into the passage anyway. As Dad had guessed, the current ran less forcefully here, though the water rose nearly as high. It moved through his clothes and chilled him further, but he took three careful steps with no problem. As he started the fourth, a light flashed on his left.

“What’s that?” he said. The light rose and fell, moving steadily closer.

“Hell if I know,” Gideon said behind Sam. “Boss?”

“Somebody else?” Dad turned his lamp to peer down the passage. The light didn’t shine toward them, but cast a faint glow against the walls and ceiling several yards away. Sam listened for a voice over the roar of the water.

“I don’t think—” he started, but the glow barreled toward him. The light moved underwater, on someone’s helmet. The body came before it, hitting Sam at the knees. He flipped face-first into the water, closing his eyes tight. The current pulled him behind the body as if caught in its gravity, but the rope pulled tight under his arms and he smashed against the side wall of the passage. He fought to his feet and took a gasp of air.

“—there, Sam?” Dad’s voice. “Sam! You hear me?”

“I’m here.” He coughed and spit the gritty water out of his mouth. The grains crunched between his teeth.

“Can you make it back to me?” Dad said.

Sam was pinned against the side of the passage, past the crosscut where Dad held the rope. He put both hands on the rope and pulled. The current was weaker against the wall, and if he stayed flat against it and moved sideways, he could make progress.

“I think so,” he said. Gideon watched him from the other side. The rope lost tautness a couple of times and Sam realized Dad was having trouble holding on. He moved faster. “I’m coming. Just hold on.” Dad didn’t reply, so Sam moved as fast as the current allowed. As soon as he grabbed the corner of the pillar, the rope went slack and Dad’s hands closed on his own, pulling him the last couple of feet around the corner. They dropped against the wall and gasped for air.

“What was that?” Dad asked.

“A body.” The word made Sam sick.

“Who?” Dad said. Sam shrugged. It could have been Julie. His blood ran cold at the thought, but the body had been too heavy. Or was it the force of the current? Dad looked at the rushing water and pulled the rope back into a loop. “You’re gonna have to help me with Gideon,” he said wearily.

“I can do that,” Sam said.

They crossed the final passages more easily, not even using the rope for the last one, where the water ran lower and calm. At the end of the dead-end passageway stood a dingy, yellow box the size of a small fifth-wheel. Rust patches bloomed on it, and a door faced them on the closest end. Guaman had shown him the refuge chamber on his first

day in the mine, though he didn't know much about it. Guaman. Was he down here somewhere? Had it been his body floating past? His hands shook as Dad tried to open the door, and he tucked them under his armpits. Dad gave the handle another tug. It looked like the latch on a meat locker. Sam shined his flashlight at the handle, but his hands shook so badly that it jumped across the front of the chamber. A line of white and red reflective material bounced the light back in their eyes. The front of the door simply read "ENTRY" in stenciled black letters.

"Goddammit!" Dad shouted, giving the handle a kick with his boot. The cold water crept up Sam's legs. His lips peeled back as if he was going to vomit, but he held the light on the door. All he could think of was Julie and Guaman.

"Let me try." Gideon stepped forward and gripped the latch with both hands. He squatted, his face level with the handle and his arms stretched before him. "Sometimes," he said, speaking with each full-body tug, "you've just—got—to use—some elbow—grease." The latch gave on the last word and the door opened. Gideon fell on his rear into the water. "Ha!" he shouted, splashing the water with his hands. The inside of the chamber loomed dark. Their helmet lights showed a clinical green and white interior that reminded Sam of the Oakland City hospital. Water poured in around Dad's boots as he stepped through the opening. He reached around toward something on the inside wall, and the inside of the chamber lit up.

"Come on," he said. The interior of the chamber was cramped, with a long, padded bench on one side, a control panel on the other, and a smaller door on the back wall. They stood momentarily, Gideon against the back wall, Sam in the middle, and Dad in the doorway.

“What you thinking, boss?” Gideon said.

“Don’t know,” Dad said. “Water’s lower over here. Could be it’s low all the way back to the face. Might be able to get up there. See what’s going on.” He leaned over to check something on the control panel, but it must have been okay, because he went back to looking out the door. “Still got that flashlight?” Sam fished it out of his pocket and handed it to Dad with shaking hands. Dad turned and looked when he felt Sam’s hands. “You okay?”

“Hope so.” Sam didn’t know the answer.

“You cold?” Dad looked around the chamber. “There’s some blankets in the—” A loud boom in the distance echoed down the passageway, shaking the chamber violently. A pencil clattered off the control panel and plopped into the water.

“Oh Jesus,” Sam said, trying and failing to keep his breathing steady. “What was—” Dad raised a finger sharply, cutting Sam off, and then peered out the door. A slower rumble grew outside the chamber. “Oh Jesus, oh Jesus,” Sam repeated, half panic and half prayer.

“Think the face is going?” Gideon asked.

“No way to know,” Dad said. “It’s likely. God damn Roger and God damn Charlie Ross.”

“Preaching to the choir there, boss.”

“What—” Sam started. A rush of water rolled through the passage, rocking the chamber and driving up the water level. Sam fell onto the bench as the chamber filled with black liquid. Gideon shouted something over the roar.

“The door!” he repeated, pushing past Sam.

“I’m trying!” Dad said, half out the doorway, his face in the rushing water, trying to pull the door closed against the current. Gideon had his hands around Dad’s waist, so Sam sprung forward and put his around Gideon and pulled hard. Dad shouted in pain and the three of them hung together for several long seconds against the current. Then Sam fell backward onto the floor. The water covered his chest as Gideon fell onto him, forcing him completely underwater. The only sound was the dull drone of moving liquid and the blood banging wildly in Sam’s ears. He flailed for air and his head made hard contact with something. He sank into the water as it grew darker, closing around him.

## Chapter Fourteen

The sun burned hot on Sam's neck, even for July. He stood in the outfield of a Little League baseball game. The Lucky Dollar Grocery Tigers against the Klipsch Insurance Athletics. That felt right. He played for the Tigers during his last summer of baseball. They roasted in the sweltering heat, losing terribly to the Athletics. Not even close. Sam didn't care. The pitchers threw the ball faster than he could swing the bat. When he played right field, he spent more time swatting horseflies than catching pop-ups. Three had been hit to him so far this season. He missed one, dropped another, and caught the third in the tip of his glove like ice cream in a cone. Dad had been ecstatic. "Way to go Sam!" he'd shouted from the bleachers, far from Sam's outpost in right. But weeks had passed with no other catches. He couldn't throw the ball to the infield without bouncing it. Sweat dribbled down the back of his dark uniform as the innings ticked by on the Dr. Pepper scoreboard.

On the drive home, Sam sat between Dad and Jake on the bench seat of the truck. Jake wore a bright yellow Winslow Trucking jersey, with a large "P" over the breast for Pirates. He played at the larger field, in the next league up. His team had won, and he was covered with dirt. He gave Dad the play-by-play, because tonight had been Dad's night to

watch Sam, even though Sam always wished Dad would just stay at Jake's field. The Pirates were undefeated.

"And then Shane tried to throw a fast ball inside and smacked Joey right on the arm. He just dropped his bat and started crying," Jake said. "But Mr. Evans came out of the dugout and walked him down to first."

"Boy's too old to cry," Dad said. "He's what, twelve?"

"I think so," Jake said. "It hit him on the bone, though."

"Still."

"How'd your game go?" Jake asked Sam, a massive wad of Big League Chew stuffed in his cheek.

"We lost."

"That's okay. There's a lot of season left." Too much.

"Tell you what, Sam," Dad said. "Why don't we practice throwing and catching a little bit when we get home?"

Sam didn't say anything, hoping Jake would jump in and offer to take Sam's place, or Dad's. "Okay," he said finally, staring at the yellow stripes sliding toward them in the middle of the road. He wanted to go home and watch TV. Before Mom left, she'd spent a few months buying Jake and Sam things to keep them occupied while she was at the hospital with Danny. They'd gotten a VCR for Christmas last year, and Sam had a decent library of tapes recorded from TV.

Instead of cartoons when they got home, though, he found himself still in uniform, standing in the front yard with his glove, a dozen feet from Dad. Jake had gone inside to clean up and start dinner. Hamburger Helper. The yard hadn't been mowed this



week, and the sun caught a million fluffy specks hovering in the warm evening. Each time Dad stepped forward to throw, small insects fluttered around his feet. Sam caught the first underhand tosses easily, but after a dozen or so, Dad backed up and started throwing overhand. Those were harder for Sam, not because he couldn't catch the ball, but because he knew Dad watched to see if he did it right. Sam struggled with the details. When should the glove be up? When should it be down? When should he reach across his body to catch it side-handed? Was the ball hitting his palm or landing in the webbing? The more things Dad told him to remember, the less often Sam caught the ball.

“You gotta close the glove or its not gonna stay in there,” Dad said as his throw hit Sam's glove and fell into the grass, riling another cloud of bugs.

“Sorry.”

“It's okay, Sammy.” Dad had called him that since Danny died. Or was it since Mom left? The two had fused in Sam's mind, though they'd occurred a couple of weeks apart. Danny had taken a turn for the worse in early January after the canceled transplant. Mom explained that Danny's kidneys couldn't work hard enough anymore. They'd gathered around his hospital bed and played card games for a week or so. Danny liked Skip-Bo. Pastor Ennis visited often, as did Granma and Granddad. At the very end, Danny smiled at Sam as if nothing were wrong, so Sam went to get a Mello Yello from the vending machine. He came back to find Mom sobbing into Dad's flannel shirt.

They buried him in the hard January ground and went home to heal, but the injury ran too close to the parts you can't live without. Dad worked longer hours at the mine. Mom would leave for the grocery store and be gone three or four hours. Wine bottles came into the house for the first time. Mom and Dad had two or three nuclear fights,

followed by nights of silence so complete that Sam feared flushing the toilet. In early February, Sam and Jake got off the bus and walked into an empty house. Some pictures had disappeared from the walls, and a few kitchen drawers looked as if they'd been rifled through. They couldn't find a note, so they waited in the living room for Dad to come home and confirm their fear. They would only set three places for dinner now.

“Dammit, Sammy, watch where you're throwing,” Dad said. Sam had tossed the ball to Dad halfheartedly, and it had fallen short, hitting a root in the yard and bouncing into the road. Dad walked down the driveway to retrieve it and tossed it back to Sam, who missed it again. It rolled behind him, to the edge of the fence, choked this time of year with ripe blackberries. The thorns scratched his hands as he dug it out and threw it back to Dad. Short again, but Dad scooped it up after it bounced.

“You can throw harder than that.”

“I guess.”

They tossed the ball back and forth a few more times, but the sun hung low, and Sam had a hard time seeing the ball. Finally, a throw slipped past his glove and hit him square on his collarbone. He yelped, and the ball rolled down the front yard into the ditch by the road, muddy from recent rain. Sam tried not to cry, but couldn't keep his mouth from puckering.

“Where'd it get you?” Dad said, putting his hand on Sam's shoulders. Sam pointed because he didn't want to open his mouth. Dad cocked his head and looked at the spot, and then put his hand on it and rubbed hard enough to produce heat. A flash of pain, and then pleasant numbness. “That better?” Sam nodded his head. His shoulder didn't hurt anymore, but something beneath it still did. Dad knelt and they looked into each

other's eyes, only a foot or so apart. "Sam, do you even want to play ball?" Sam shook his head slowly, and the beginning of a sob escaped his throat before he swallowed the rest. Dad sighed. "Then you don't have to play anymore." He stood and swatted Sam on the butt, sending him in the direction of the house. Sam only looked back once on his way to the TV—a glimpse of Dad in the ditch, digging the baseball out of the muck.

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For a strange moment, the flurry of insects and dying summer sunlight congealed with splashing water and the buzz of fluorescent bulbs. Dad's voice drew closer.

"—checked everything I can, but it's been a year since they've had a technician down here." He sounded angry. Sam opened his eyes to find himself slumped in the bench in the corner of the refuge chamber. His legs felt wet, and when he looked down, water rose to his knees. He tried to stand and banged the top of his head on something metal.

"Shit," he muttered, dropping back to the bench.

"Look who's awake," Dad said, turning from the control panel. He looked relieved. "Watch your head." Gideon sat at the other end of the bench with his knees tucked under his chin to keep his feet out of the water.

"What's going on?" Sam asked, coughing. "What happened?" He tried to lift his legs out of the water like Gideon, but they slipped back into the dark liquid.

"You panicked," Dad said. "Cracked your head on the bench." He turned back to the instrument panel.

"How long was I out?"

“Not long.” Dad tapped one of the gauges on the panel in front of him. “We pulled you out of the water and set you down. You were groaning, so I figured you just passed out. You were next on my list of things to check.”

“Glad I had a place in line.”

“Had to get the door closed and check the readouts.” He pointed toward the gauge. “Know what this is?”

“No.” Sam touched his head. No blood.

“Oxygen level. Chamber’s got thirty-six hours of air for six men when it’s full.”

“Okay.” The cold water needled at his toes, and he lifted his feet to the bench again. “That’s three days for three people, right?”

“Would be if the tanks were full,” Gideon said.

“They’re not?” Sam said. The panic rose again, but he forced it down.

“Don’t think so,” Dad said. “Least, not all of them. Chamber’s got four tanks. Two show full, two show empty. Maybe true, maybe not. I don’t know what this water’s doing to the insides of this box,” he said, smacking the control panel with his palm. “We’ve got light and air, and the CO<sub>2</sub> scrubber seems to work, but I got no idea how far to trust these numbers.”

“Is it safe to go out yet?” Sam said.

“What do you think?” Dad said, jerking a thumb toward the door. The bulb on that end of the chamber didn’t work, making it hard to see. The small window looked out into the mine passage, but as Sam’s eyes adjusted, he saw tiny particles floating in water on the other side.

“Oh, Jesus.”

“There’s a conversation you might wanna start,” Gideon said.

Small streams of water ran down both sides of the door, with smaller sprays jetting out into the chamber. Most seeped from the top, following the raised edge of the door to the dark water that filled the bottom foot and a half of the chamber.

“Can we plug that?”

“We can try,” Dad said, moving from the control panel to the small door at the back of the chamber.

“What’ve we got?” Gideon said.

Food,” Dad said, opening it and rifling through the shelves, “flashlights, batteries, self-rescuers, some tools.” He stopped. “Here we go.” A roll of electrical tape. He went to the door and fiddled with the tape for several minutes, cursing every time it didn’t work. “Dammit,” he finally said. “Can’t keep the door dry.” He threw the roll hard into the water. It disappeared below the surface with a plop.

Sam stiffened. “Julie.” He stood again, careful of his head this time. “What about Julie?” His fear for her washed over him, colder than the water. The water in the window swirled. Had she escaped it?

“What about her?” Dad said.

“Have you heard anything?” He sat again, knowing the answer. “From anybody, I mean?”

“We’ve been in here maybe ten minutes, son. No radios working. I got no idea what’s going on out there.” He turned to the door again.

Sam stared at the steady leak. “Any other options for stopping that?” The cold water crept slowly up his legs. If it rose fast enough to notice, they’d be dead in, what, an hour? Two?

“Hell if I know,” Dad said. “You got any ideas?”

Sam looked at the supply cabinet and the oily water rising toward it, trying to put Julie out of his mind long enough to think. The swirls on the surface reflected eerie yellow light. He opened his mouth, but closed it again like a gawping fish.

“What about you, Gideon?” Dad said, turning to the roof-bolter, still balled up at the end of the bench.

“I don’t know,” he said flatly. “I’m an electrical guy.”

“Wait a minute,” Sam said, looking back at the storage cabinet. An assortment of bottled water and dry goods sat on the shelf. He pulled a granola bar from one of the boxes and tore it open, moving to the door and elbowing Dad aside. He squeezed the bar into a rounder shape. At first, it wanted to break off in clumps, but he dipped the sticky mass into the water. Moistened, it stuck together better, and he rolled a chunk of it between his fingers into a small cylinder.

“What’re you doing?” Gideon said behind him.

“I get it,” Dad said, grabbing another bar from the cabinet.

Sam took the long, sticky roll and placed it on the seam at the top of the door. At first, it didn’t want to stay put, but he braced his feet against the base of the control panel and pressed it hard into the crevice. When he took his hand away, the sticky patch had slowed the leaking water.

“There.” Sam wiped his forehead with a sticky hand.

“I’ll be damned,” Gideon said.

“Not too shabby,” Dad said, pressing some into the other corner. “We’ll see how long it holds.” They patched all the leaks they could find, and by the time they dropped onto the bench, crowded for three people, they were sweating.

“Okay, what else can we do?” Sam said, heartened by his burst of inventiveness.

“We can wait for the water to drop,” Dad said. The control panel buzzed, and they watched it expectantly. When the buzz went away, they leaned back against the wall.

“Coal water won’t burn, will it?” Sam asked, worried that the buzzing control panel would ignite it. Hopefully, Julie’s refuge chamber was watertight. If she’d found one.

“Far as I know, ain’t no water flammable,” Dad said. “Though I did see a picture of some river in Ohio burning once.”

“Cuyahoga,” Gideon said without looking up. He rested his face across his arms, clearly worried about Hoot. Sam tried to imagine Jake in the same situation and couldn’t. Julie was bad enough. And Guaman.

“That’s the one,” Dad said.

They sat for a while in the flickering light, listening to dripping water.

“Will they send somebody down to get us?” Sam finally said.

“When they can,” Dad said. “Not while the water’s up.”

“Will it drop soon?”

“No idea,” Dad said. “Water’s the worst thing in a mine after fire, because it’s unpredictable.”

“What do you mean?”

“Up top, water goes downhill,” Dad said. “Path of least resistance, right?” Sam nodded. “Down here, it’s doing the opposite. Downhill is from the entrance to the face. But it busted through at the face and went toward the entrance. Pressure’s got it moving places it wouldn’t normally go.”

“Pressure from where?” Sam asked.

“Some old mine we didn’t know about, most likely,” Gideon said, offering the two of them a glance.

“We knew they were out there,” Dad said. “Didn’t know exactly where, though.”

“Why the hell not?” Sam said.

“Because companies seventy years ago didn’t keep great records,” he said sharply.

“But we do, right?” Sam said.

“When we can,” Dad said, lifting his hat off his head to scratch his bald spot.

“So you knew we were digging toward this and let us keep going anyway?” Sam said.

“I knew we were digging *near* it,” Dad said, fitting his hat back onto his head.

“Nearer than Roger thought, anyway, but not this close.”

Sam thought of all the times he’d heard Dad and Roger arguing over rain or wet conditions. Of Roger’s increasingly tired face over the past months. Of the miners outside of the refuge chamber. “Could you have stopped this?”

Dad looked at him a long time. “I don’t know,” he finally said. The words echoed against the metal walls.



“Bullshit,” Gideon said, uncurling his legs into the water. “Your daddy’s not the problem. He fought those company assholes whenever they showed up. ‘Too fast,’ he says. ‘Slow down.’ But they don’t listen. He fights too hard, he gets fired, and then things’d go sigogglin around here for real. Goddamn non-union mines.”

“So you didn’t want to complain too much,” Sam said. Dad’s face was as furrowed now as Roger’s.

“I guess I complained plenty. Just not enough.”

“Complaints don’t matter none,” Gideon said. “Gotta hit the quota for the company, whether it gaums things up or not.”

Dad’s head hung between his shoulders and his eyes didn’t leave the swirling surface of the water, now up nearly to their knees. Sam turned to Gideon.

“Stupid question,” he said. “What’s ‘sigogglin’ mean?”

Gideon cracked a grin, the first Sam had seen inside the chamber. “Means crooked,” Gideon said, “or not built right. Like this box we’re stuck in.” He nodded toward the door. Some granola putty had dropped from the door seam, but most stuck tight. The more Sam watched, the less he believed it slowed the water down. Probably just kept it from spraying.

“And people say that a lot in Virginia?”

“Don’t know about Virginia. Folks says it a fair amount in West Virginia.”

“Learn something new everyday.”

Dad raised his head. “If you haven’t learned anything yet today, you’re not paying attention,” he said. Gideon chuckled.

“What about your brother’s name?” Sam asked. “What does ‘Ball-Hoot’ mean? I’ve never heard it before.” Gideon looked up at him, his eyes shiny. “I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I wasn’t thinking. I—”

“He doesn’t think too often, really,” Dad said, slapping Sam on the shoulder.

“It’s fine,” Gideon said. He pulled his legs out of the water and rubbed his hands together. His breath rose in front of him. “Getting cold in here,” he said. “You toss me one of those blankets, and I’ll tell you about Hoot.” Dad reached into the cabinet and pulled out a rolled blanket, tossing it to Gideon. He unrolled it and hung it over his raised knees. “Ball-hoot used to be what the loggers called it when they’d skid tree trunks downhill to the river. Don’t know why. Cars came along, though, and folks started calling it a ball-hoot whenever some crazy ass bootlegger’d tear around those mountain roads. ‘He had to ball-hoot down the mountain to get away from those government boys,’ folks’d say. White folks, anyways. Most of the black folks didn’t have cars back then. That’s what my daddy said. But by the time me and Hoot was growing up, folks in the colored part of the holler had a few cars between them. Daddy had a seventy-one Pinto he’d bought from a fella in town. Course, by the time he bought it, it was rusted out around the bumpers, and everybody’d heard for years about how they’d blow up if you looked at them wrong. Mostly sat out by the woodshed, but every once in a while, Daddy’d fire it up and take it into town for something. When I turned fourteen, he taught me how to drive it. ‘Watch those curves,’ he’d say if I let my foot off the brake too long. Still hate the smell of burning brakes.

“Anyways, a few years later, Hoot got old enough to drive. His real name’s Harold, after my granddaddy.” He stopped and splashed his fingers in the water. “And

my daddy says one day, ‘Harold,’ he says, ‘You ready to drive that old Pinto bean?’ That’s what he called it. And Hoot says, ‘Yes sir, I sure am.’ And so they walk over to the shed and climb into the front seats. He lets Hoot get in the driver’s seat, one of those big bucket seats, and it nearly swallowed him up. You know the kind.” Sam had a vague sense of it, but Dad shook his head as if he’d driven one yesterday. “He had him start the car, but saw his eyes wasn’t over the steering wheel. ‘You don’t move,’ daddy says. ‘I’m gonna get a block of wood for you to sit on.’ It was just a few steps to the woodshed, but before he could get back, that Pinto bean shot down our driveway and onto the road, all in reverse.”

“You’re shitting me,” Dad said.

“Sure ain’t, boss,” Gideon said, smiling. Tears ran from his eyes. “Hoot swears to this day that car just fell into gear, but that don’t hold water. Shifter was a bear. He just wanted to drive by himself, I guess. Anyways, the road out of our property ran straight longer than most, and then turned gentle toward town. Somehow, Hoot made the first turn in reverse. Course, the car wasn’t going more than fifteen or twenty, but it looked like eighty to me. We chased after it, but once it went around the bend we lost it. A minute or so later, we hear this big boom, like fireworks in the air, and Daddy says, ‘No, please no, Jesus,’ and we haul ass down around that curve, dead leaves flying all around us, and when we make it around, we see that rusty old Pinto burning so hot it’s catching the top of a tree on fire. Its back bumper’s wrapped around the trunk, and Hoot’s standing a ways off, just watching it burn, like he’d gone for a walk and found it there.”

“How’d he get out?” Sam asked.

“Said he just opened the door and stepped out.” Gideon laughed. “Daddy whipped his butt good for that one. Made him go pick his own switch and everything. But he didn’t stay mad long. He was so glad that Hoot was all right, and glad the Pinto finally blew without hurting anybody. Fact, he was the one give Hoot his name. Went to church on Sunday and the preacher asked Daddy if Hoot was okay, because news travels on the mountain. ‘He’s fine,’ Daddy says, ‘but Ball-Hoot here wants to know if he can borrow your car next time, preacher.’ The name stuck.” He tightened his grip on the blanket. Dad moved to the cabinet and pulled out two more, handing one to Sam.

“There’s chambers at the face,” Dad said, unrolling his blanket. “If he can survive crashing a seventy-one Pinto, he can survive this. He’s a smart fella.”

“He never was that,” Gideon said. “But if he had time, he knew where to go.”

No one spoke for a while. The chamber grew colder, and Dad gave a second blanket to everyone. Sam rearranged himself so he could put his legs out and rest them on the front edge of the control panel, giving Dad and Gideon both more room to loosen their legs up on the bench. After the blankets, Dad handed out some food. Trail mix, bottled water, and a box of Twinkies. “I put these in here a couple years ago,” Dad said, tearing open the box. “Guess they’re still good.”

“Pretty sure,” Sam said.

The trail mix tasted good, but Sam didn’t eat much. He imagined scenarios where Julie would have been close to a refuge chamber. If she’d been at the face, two would have been nearby, but that’s where the water had busted through. Had there been time to move? He wanted Dad’s opinion. It would be better than most facts down here. Instead,

he drank some water and ate two Twinkies, fresh as the driven snow. After they ate, Sam asked Dad what was happening topside.

“Water’s staying this high here,” Dad said, “means that the mine’s flooded at least a quarter mile from the face, maybe more.”

“Completely flooded?”

“Could be some pockets. Read about some boys in Pennsylvania once. Busted through to a river and it flooded the mine. Killed some of them. Lots more made it out, though.” He took a deep breath. “No reason to panic yet. This water’s coming from another mine. More water in it than there is in here. That’s where the pressure’s coming from. Sooner or later, pressure’s gone, and then the water’ll act like water again. It’ll drop. Question is, how soon and how far?”

“Can they send somebody down to get us, like a SCUBA guy or something?”

“SCUBA guy couldn’t see two feet in front of his face,” Gideon said, jerking a thumb at the dark window.

“But they know there’s a problem, right?” Sam pictured Roger in his office smoking cigarettes, unaware of the floodwater.

Dad looked at his wristwatch. “Shift ended two hours ago. They know something’s wrong.” He tapped the watch and put it to his ear, but seemed content with what he heard.

“So what are they doing, then? Just standing there waiting for the water to drop?”

“They’re waiting, but they’re not standing around. By now, they’ve called corporate, and probably the feds.” He smiled. “I bet Roger hated doing that.”

“Why?”

“Ain’t nothing worse for a mine than bringing feds in,” Gideon said. “Even if it’s nothing big, they’re gonna drop a big pile of paperwork and regulations on you.

Something like this?” He gestured around the chamber. “Game over.”

“They’d shut us down?”

“Likely will,” Dad said. “But you never know with feds. They’ve got no love for coal these days, that’s for sure.”

“Or coal miners,” Gideon said.

“So we just wait for the water to drop and they’ll come get us?”

“Maybe,” Dad said. “Maybe not.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a can of chew. Once he’d tucked it into his lip, he looked more comfortable. He spit a few grains into the water and licked his lips. “Water in these dry passages, soaking into the coal and rock. Good chance that when the water goes down, so does the roof.” He saw the fear on Sam’s face. “Not the whole mine. But spots with bad top?” He snapped his fingers. The sound bounced around the chamber.

“There’s a lot of those,” Gideon said. “Trust me.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “So we wait for the water to go down, hope the roof doesn’t cave in, and try to walk out. Or do we sit here and wait?”

“I’m not staying in here any longer than I have to,” Dad said. “But once the water’s down, there might be air to breathe or there might not.”

Sam’s shoulders slumped. “Why wouldn’t there be air?”

“There’ll be air,” Dad said. “We just may not want to breathe it. Coal holds methane. We keep the air moving with fans and throw down rock dust to keep it away.

Flooding screws all that. There'll be methane in pockets when the water goes down. But that's why we've got this," he said, slapping the box hanging from his belt loop.

"Methane detector?" Sam guessed.

"Among other things," Dad said.

"Okay, then," Sam said, sorry he'd asked any questions.

"Good news is, if we get out, you'll make the national news," Dad said, slapping Sam on the back.

"That's for sure," Gideon said, looking up as if he could see through the earth. "If there ain't already a fleet of news trucks up there, will be by morning. Folks love a mine disaster." It came out "deesaster." "They ran trucks up the mountain back home when those Sago boys got killed. Pretty sure they can find their way to Arthur."

Sam's head spun. He'd spent years barricaded in his bedroom, practicing guitar, wishing something would happen to make life here interesting. The last time Pike County had made the national news was when Dan Quayle came to town after the Petersburg tornadoes in 1990 and declared it a disaster area. In the end, only five or six people died that night. How many were already dead here? The other four at the face, plus whoever else might be moving things in and out of the mine? How many had found a refuge chamber? He thought of Brick and his son. Of Julie and her boys. Of Guaman, Pilar, and little Beatriz. Five or six people could be dead. Eight or nine if the air ran out in here.

Dad and Gideon talked more about Sago, but eventually grew quiet. The heat from the control panel couldn't hold off the chill, though some pocket warmers Dad found in the supply cabinet helped. Sam had lost track of time. Dad closed his eyes, and Gideon nodded a few times. They'd been in the chamber at least six hours, and the sun

was surely down outside. His eyes grew heavy, and he drifted to sleep only half convinced he'd wake up again.

He didn't dream, but woke to the sound of Dad whispering, "Wake up, son. Wake up." He opened his eyes to find the chamber had grown darker. The overhead light was off, and the greenish emergency bulb in the corner flickered occasionally. The only other light came from a few lit buttons on the control panel. Sam's head hurt where he'd hit it, as did his knees. He'd fallen asleep with them propped on the edge of the control panel, and gravity had done a number on them while he dozed.

"Ow," he said. "What is it?"

"You were groaning in your sleep. I was afraid you'd wake Gideon up." The West Virginian sat balled up on the corner of the bench, his face buried in his arms and soft snores escaping from his throat.

"Sorry." Sam swallowed hard and wiped sleep from his eyes. "What time is it?"

Dad looked at his watch. "When this thing stopped, it was almost midnight." He slipped the band off his wrist and laid it on the control panel. "Takes a licking and keeps on ticking my ass."

"So it's the middle of the night?" He slipped his legs off the control panel and bent his knees, slowly and painfully. His lower legs dropped into the water. "Shit that's cold."

"Thermometer says forty-eight." Dad pointed to a small box on the back wall next to the storage door.

"That good or bad?"



“We’re not gonna freeze to death, but it’s gonna get damn uncomfortable soon. Here.” He tossed Sam two more of the pocket warmers, which Sam busted with his good hand and stuffed in his pockets. The scars on his bad hand hurt in cold weather, and the warmth felt wonderful on them. “What were you dreaming about?” Dad leaned back against the wall.

“Nothing I can remember.”

“Something got you riled up.” They settled into a half-whisper as Gideon sawed logs beside them. “Sounded like a sick dog.”

Sam sat forward and water rolled onto the bench, soaking the seat of his pants. Easily three inches higher than when he’d fallen asleep.

“Still rising,” Dad said. “Your candy bar trick worked, but it’s not gonna last.” In the darkness it was hard to see the door. Half of the patches had fallen, leaving bits of granola and fruit floating on the iridescent surface. “I’m gonna get you out of here.” Dad leaned forward. “You know that, right?”

“I know you’ll try,” Sam said, not convinced that the fireboss called the shots anymore.

“I will.” He didn’t speak again for so long that Sam thought he’d drifted back off. “I promised your mother.”

“What?” Other than hazy childhood memories, he had few recollections of Dad talking about Mom. “When?”

“A week after she left.” Dad spit a long rope of tobacco juice into the far corner of the chamber. “Would have been, what? Nineteen eighty-four?”

“Eighty-three.”

“Course. Eighty-three.” He cleared his throat. “She called one night while you boys were at Granddad and Granma’s. You were over there a lot after she left.” He paused, glancing at the control panel. “She called to say she was sorry. Made me promise I’d take care of you and Jake.”

“What else did she say?”

“Not much. We said all we had to say before she left. I told her I’d look after you boys, and then she hung up.”

There had to be more. Sam had spent most of his life pretending his mother didn’t exist, but now he could almost hear her voice again. “How did she sound?” He expected Dad to scoff at the question. It had been thirty years.

“Tired. We were all tired then. All the time.”

Sam tried to imagine her fatigued voice. “I don’t remember what she sounded like,” he said. The control panel sputtered a moment and fell silent.

“You wouldn’t want to remember this.” Dad leaned back again.

“Yes I would.”

“If you say so.” Gideon stirred in his sleep, and they both watched him until his soft snores resumed. “But you’re wrong.” He took his hat off and rubbed the back of his neck. “Losing a child’s the worst thing in the world,” he said, staring at the water.

“Nothing else comes close. Nothing. Having time to get ready don’t make a difference. Nothing makes a difference. Everything’s just—” His mouth turned down at the corners and he moved his head slowly from side to side. “—flat. Gray. I don’t know. Your mom left because she was broken. You boys didn’t need her like that.”

“She left because of me.” Sam had never put the words together before. Not even in his mind. They’d lurked for thirty years, waiting to be excavated like the coal outside.

“Why do you think that?” Dad looked confused.

“Because I—” He stopped. Even here, buried alive, the words wouldn’t come.

“Spit it out, son.”

“I let Danny die.”

He felt Dad’s eyes on him, but couldn’t raise his own to meet them.

“Where’d you get that idea?” Sam didn’t speak. “Because you didn’t do the transplant?” Sam nodded. “Let that go, son. It wasn’t your decision.”

“I was afraid, and then Mom told me they’d canceled everything.”

Dad took a deep breath. “Jesus, the way we remember things.” Sam finally looked up. “You didn’t decide anything. You were scared, but the doctors scared your mom more, said you and Jake could have kidney problems, too. You didn’t, of course.” He gritted his teeth and exhaled. “But your mom was afraid for you. Afraid of going through it again. You got scared because she was scared, but she’s the one put everything on hold. I tried to talk her out of it, but Danny took a turn, faster than any of us expected—” He trailed off. Sam sat on the edge of the bench, numb from the water and Dad’s words. “If I’d have known you thought that, I’d have told you a long time ago.” But he hadn’t. Or couldn’t.

“Wait,” Sam said, processing. “Is that why Mom left? She blamed herself?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. She left because she needed to get better. She saw Danny in all our faces, and it was too much.” He crossed his arms under his blanket.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” Dad looked small against the wall of the chamber. Withered.

“How did you get better?”

“Don’t guess I did. Don’t guess I ever will.” His mouth puckered. “You boys deserved better.” He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling.

They sat like that for a while. Sam wanted to tell Dad it was okay, that he’d done fine, but that wasn’t true. None of them had done fine. Mom, driven from her sons. Dad, younger than Sam was now, trying to hold them together. Then he thought of Julie’s boys, and how worried they would be topside.

“Where’d she call from?” Sam asked. Since the day she’d left, he’d never known where she’d gone.

“I don’t know.” Dad drew his blanket tighter. “Probably out on the plains somewhere. Didn’t hear from her for a long time after that.”

“She called again?” Sam said, shocked.

“Never did. But she sent some letters once she got settled. Mostly for legal reasons, needing papers from the house, stuff like that.”

“Settled where?” The hair on Sam’s arms stood. “Where is she?”

“Not sure these days. The letters had a return address somewhere in California. Can’t remember the town. Looked it up once, though. Somewhere up north.” He yawned, and the wrinkles in his face smoothed.

“You think she’s still there?” Sam was afraid to hear the answer.

“I don’t know, son. Haven’t heard from her in twenty years. She could be in Russia for all I know. She could be dead.” It felt like a slap.

“There’s no way. Somebody would have called. That’s how it works.”

“Why would somebody call me?” Dad’s face became unreadable again. “Because I was married to her for a while thirty years ago? Maybe she found another husband, never told him about any of us. Best way to start a new life is to forget the old one.” He spit out his pellet of tobacco, splashing water against the wall.

“Don’t I know it.”

“You don’t know as much as you think.”

A clanging sound echoed in the chamber. Gideon raised his head and said “hmmff.” It came from the control panel, and Sam’s excitement twisted into fear. Gideon started to speak, but Dad put his finger to his lips. Sam dropped his feet into the water, leaning forward to listen. The water covered his hips. A second clang sounded from the opposite wall, but clearly not from the control panel.

“The hell?” Dad said, stepping across the chamber. Water swirled around his legs, and the strong smell of coal filled the chamber. Dad leaned against the far wall, trying to see something in the dim light.

“Think it’s the battery?” Gideon said.

“Don’t think so,” Dad said. “But then—” Another noise, this time less of a clang than a flat banging sound. They looked around the small metal box as the echo faded. When it came again, a flash of motion glinted in the corner of Sam’s eye. He looked up at the dark window. Instead of water, he saw two bright eyes and a large grin full of gold teeth.

## Chapter Fifteen

In the faint blue light of their helmets, it looked like a flame trembling just below the surface of the oily water. Gideon saw it first and pointed. The four men stood transfixed, as if they'd crossed a will o' wisp from the storybooks Mom once read to Sam. As their lights bounced off the water, it flickered in and out of sight. Sam feared for a wild moment it was a creature escaped from the underwater caverns of the old mine, loose at last to find its way back to the world above. It moved toward them. Guaman stepped back, muttering in Spanish. The water splashed and then settled around his legs. No one moved.

#

Guaman had found them in the refuge chamber half an hour ago. When they'd opened the door, he'd flopped inside onto the bench, exhausted. He'd been checking the sensors above the beltline when the water broke through, and spent several hours trapped in an air pocket above it, his back resting on the top of the belt assembly, and his face inches from the roof of the mine. He didn't say much about those hours in the thin space between water and rock, but dread lingered beneath his smile as he explained. When the water started to drop, he'd rolled off the assembly and found his mantrip on its side, its

batteries ruined. He walked toward the entrance, hoping to find a rescue crew already working its way down, but after a hundred yards, he found the passage blocked by a wet pile of bad top pulled down by water and current. Knowing there were eight parallel passages toward the entrance, he backtracked and tried another. That one went further, but still dead-ended. One by one, he took each path, hoping to find an open lane, or the sound of workers busting through debris. Once, he thought he heard something and shouted until he grew hoarse, but it was only the beltline trying to kick back on, trapped under tons of rock just a few yards from where he'd been trapped. With no way out, he risked moving further into the mine to search for survivors. He said this matter-of-factly, though Sam shuddered at how frightened he must have been, looking down the long expanse of water running further than his light could shine.

Dad asked Guaman some questions about the cave-ins and the beltline, and Gideon gave him food and hand warmers. Sam hugged him, and though embarrassed, Guaman returned the embrace. Then Sam asked if he'd seen Julie. He hadn't. They sat in the chamber for twenty minutes, sorting through provisions and stuffing their pockets with food and supplies.

"All right, boys," Dad said. "I've got to go further down and see what I can see. The rest of you don't. G-Man, Gideon, I'd appreciate it if you'd get Sam out of here." Guaman nodded, but Gideon crossed his arms.

"My brother's that way, boss," he said, nodding toward the face, "so that's where I'm headed." Dad looked at him, and then at Guaman, who would do what Dad asked, but probably just wanted to see his wife and baby.

“I’m going too,” Sam said. He didn’t want to. He’d rather try to leave with Guaman, but he couldn’t take the easy path while Dad took the hard one. Such thinking had cost him his hand, but he couldn’t let Dad go deeper without him.

“No way,” Dad said. Guaman gave Sam a glance that could have been disappointment or admiration.

“We can stand here and argue, or we can get going,” Sam said. “I doubt we’ve got a lot of time.”

Even in the bluish helmet lights, Dad’s face clearly reddened. “Goddammit.” He stepped through the door into the passageway. The water swirled around his knees as he looked around. “Fine. But you stay behind me and do exactly what I say, or I’ll drag you upstairs myself.”

“Okay,” Sam said, happy to be at arm’s length.

“That goes for all three of you,” Dad said, his gruff voice near a whisper. “I call the shots. We turn around if I say so.” He looked at Gideon on the last part. “Single file behind me, no lollygagging. Don’t be stupid and don’t be heroes. Now put on your air packs.”

He unhooked one of the blue and silver boxes from his belt and in just a few seconds had it split open. He pulled a mouthpiece from the middle, with a long hose running back to the box itself. As he pulled, a small hiss escaped the contraption. Dad put the mouthpiece between his teeth and slid an assembly over his nose, pinching his nostrils shut. He closed the box and looped it around his neck, using a string that had fallen out with the mouthpiece. The whole process took less than fifteen seconds. “Come on, come on,” Dad said through the mouthpiece, a voice from the bottom of a well.



“Methane’s got no odor, but it’s seeping out of these wet rocks. Fans are off, so it’s just hanging there.” Gideon and Guaman had their mouthpieces out by the time Sam cracked his open, and he watched them to get the procedure right. He pulled the mouthpiece and heard the hiss, though Guaman had to help him get the strap around his neck. “You got an hour of clean air in those,” Dad said. “We’ve got extras, but not many, so breathe slow and regular.” Sam took a deep breath. It tasted like burnt eggs.

Dad started walking, and they fell in line behind him, Gideon first, Sam, and Guaman last. The air felt warmer outside the chamber, but not by much. Though they had four lights pointed ahead, the darkness swallowed them.

The further they walked toward the face, the higher the water rose. By the time they reached the break room, Sam’s back pockets were wet. The temperature grew colder by the step. Without power, the flooded break room stood dark. Most of the tables had overturned, along with some cabinets. The small refrigerator still stood, though its door hung wide open. Tupperware containers floated on the water’s surface, bunched against a wall. Small battery-powered lights flashed here and there. A radio on top of the fridge, something small and red inside one of the tipped cabinets. Their legs swished through the water as the Tupperware clunked against rock.

“Anybody there?” Dad said as loudly as he dared. The soggy top could come down without warning, roof bolts or no. The words bounced around the break room and disappeared down the side passages.

“There.” Gideon pointed. The pale, flame-like shape drifted under the water’s surface. It seemed to move, or was it ripples in the water? Sam thought of subterranean creatures as Gideon stepped backward and muttered in Spanish. Dad stepped forward.

“Stay here.” They watched him, illuminated in the blue beams of their helmets. As he moved closer, he blocked their view. A deep splash echoed from one of the side passages. Rock falling into water. Dad took a few more steps and stopped. His shoulders sagged as if they’d taken on weight, and the way he cocked his head made Sam shiver.

“What is it?” Gideon said, but Dad didn’t respond. Instead, he leaned against the rock face. His shoulders heaved up and down several times. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow, even among the echoes.

“Boys, come give me a hand.”

They filed forward, and as they stepped around Dad, the wisp reappeared. Closer, it looked like tentacles, and for a moment, Sam feared the unnamed creature again. But there were no tentacles. Only wavy strands of frosted blonde hair.

“Oh God.” Sam’s knees buckled and he sank up to his chest in the water. “Oh my God.” He felt hands under his arms, and he rose back to his feet.

“Stay up, chochera,” Guaman said. “The water is too cold.”

Their lights glared down, bleaching Julie’s hair white. A strand broke the water’s surface, brilliant gold against the greasy swirls. Below her hair, the dark mass of her shoulders and back, covered by a work coat, disappeared beneath the foul water. Her face looked down at a floor they couldn’t see. Her boys waited on the surface with the other families, watching to see who might appear, unaware they’d never hear her voice again. Sam shut his eyes, but warm tears spilled through. Arms were on him. He stood under their weight until they released him, and then he wiped his face with a soggy sleeve and looked around at the men.

“What do we do?” he said.

“Can’t leave her here,” Dad said. “Can we get her to one of those tables? Water’s going down. Should be okay there for a while.” What did “a while” mean?

They spread out around her. Gideon and Guaman carried her under each arm, while Dad and Sam reached around her torso and legs. As they walked, her lowered head cut through the water like the prow of a ship. They rolled her onto the table as gently as they could. Dark drops of water and coal ran down her face. Her eyes were shut, and her lips hung slightly open. A fleck of coal stuck on a front tooth. Her pant leg had gotten bunched around her knee, and her tattoo stood out in harsh relief against her pale leg. Dad moved to the body and unhooked Julie’s self-rescuer, latching it beside the others on his belt. It felt like stealing.

“We can’t just leave her.” Sam’s words sounded distant through his mask. He imagined her lying there alone as their lights disappeared around a corner.

“Can’t take her with us,” Gideon said. He put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “She’s gone on. Nothing here but the leavings.” It’s what Jake would say. Sam didn’t know if it was true, but it had to be for now.

“Okay,” Sam said.

“Okay,” Dad repeated. “There’s a refuge chamber off both sides of the face. Let’s work our way left to right, and let’s get a move on. Thirty minutes until these air packs are shot.” Sam followed them, the last to turn his light away from Julie.

At the face, the water level rose considerably, almost above Sam’s waist, and the air, even through the mask, smelled putrid.

“Is that methane?” Sam said. Somewhere to their left, water dripped noisily.

“Methane’s odorless. Said that already,” came Dad’s voice from up ahead.

“What is it then?” The floor up here was more solid. The water had washed away the muck.

“Sulfur,” Gideon said. “Smells like rotten eggs, don’t it? Water’s pulling it out of the coal.” He wrinkled his face beneath his mask and kept walking. Ahead, something beeped.

“That’s methane,” Dad said, unsnapping the monitor from his belt and looking at it. “Congratulations, fellas. Those air packs are keeping you alive.”

They turned a corner and the refuge chamber loomed before them. Water rose halfway up its door. This one looked different from the earlier one—newer, larger, and long like a semi trailer. Even in the dim headlamps, its yellow paint glimmered. The reflective surfaces shot light across the walls like a disco ball. Light glowed faintly in the small window. Dad stepped to the door and unhooked Julie’s self-rescuer from his belt. He lifted it and banged it softly against the door. No one moved. He lifted it again, but the door latch popped before he could knock again. The door swung open. Dad had to step out the way to avoid it. A tall silhouette stood in the opening.

“Holy shit am I glad to see you guys,” Brick’s voice boomed. Sam felt the vibrations in the water.

“Keep your voice down,” Dad hissed through his self-rescuer, “and put this on.” He handed Brick Julie’s canister. Brick did as he was told. Standing still, the water felt much colder. Sam’s toes had gone numb. Gideon looked inside the chamber and sank a bit when he found it empty.

“Come across anybody else?” Brick said once he had his mouthpiece in place.

“Julie,” Dad said. “Drowned.” It sounded like a diagnosis.

“Jesus.” He looked at Sam. “Anybody else?”

“Just you so far,” Dad said.

“You seen Hoot anywhere?” Gideon asked, turning back from the chamber.

“Nah. He was off getting more bolts, I think.”

“What happened?” Dad said, gesturing back toward the face.

“Miner busted through to the water. One minute it’s just chugging away, next minute there’s this sound like somebody turned on a fire hose. If I’d been in the main passage, I’d have been knocked back half a mile. But I was in a crosscut. Looked around, but couldn’t find nobody. Julie was off on her loader.” He took a deep breath, and his air pack hissed. “Hoot was getting bolts, and Big John was off doing whatever Big John does, so I hightailed it over here. Kept the door open until the water got so high I thought it’d suck me back out. Then I closed it and kept an eye out the window.” He tilted his helmet back and scratched his forehead. The light danced on the roof. “Never saw nobody.”

“Any self-rescuers in there?” Dad jerked a thumb toward the chamber.

“Some.”

“Grab what you can clip on your belts, boys. Be quick about it.”

They filed in and grabbed two each, along with some food. More granola, some snack crackers, and some Baby Ruth candy bars someone had stashed. Sam thought of Julie again, working so close to the ruptured wall. Had she been on the loader? Taking a break and smoking a cigarette while they repaired the cable? Had she been close to safety? Had she even known what was happening? He remembered his own struggle to cross the passages earlier, how hard it had been to know up from down in the current. She

must have been terrified. But maybe not. She had more courage than Sam. His terror wasn't necessarily hers. She might have fought toward safety and finally accepted that she wouldn't make it, her last thoughts of her boys. Sam had let himself imagine being their stepdad once or twice. All gone now.

The cold water made their legs sluggish as they walked to the next chamber. Sam's feet ached with pins and needles. His mouthpiece filled with condensation and made it difficult to breathe. When he took it off to shake out the water droplets, the sickly taste of sulfur overwhelmed him. Once, he grew so lightheaded he almost sank into the water. Guaman put a hand under his arm and, without speaking, kept him moving forward. They twisted and turned on their way to the chamber because the roof had fallen in places. Gideon thought they could climb over it, but Dad refused to cross under top that had already collapsed once. Sam's mind swam as they walked, filled less with thoughts than images. Julie's hair in the water, her boys playing video games, pitch and catch on a summer day, the congregation at Guaman's church, dinner with Jake and Libby and Danny. He needed sleep, but wouldn't get any soon.

The second chamber mirrored the first, bright yellow and shiny, but no light came from the window. The door was closed tight. They fanned out wordlessly around the entrance. This chamber stood closer to the face, and the air felt warmer here, though the water still froze their legs. Sam stared at the window, waiting for a face to appear. Their lights danced around it. He felt a tug at his belt. Dad pulled one of Sam's extra self-rescuer off and walked up to the door, banging it gently between the window and the water. Brick and Guaman didn't breathe. Gideon looked haunted, his cheeks sunken as if starving. His bottom lip worked in and out below his bushy mustache. Dad banged the

rescuer harder against the door. The clang echoed down the passages, bouncing back in syncopated rhythms. Streams of water ran down the door seam. This would have been the closer chamber for Julie. Had she tried to make it here? How close had she gotten?

“Stand back,” Dad said, gripping the door handle. He pulled, but it didn’t unlatch. Putting one of his boots on the chamber wall, he tugged harder, grunting through his mouthpiece. The door swung open. Dad fell backwards against Brick, who barely kept them both on their feet. Water rushed out of the opening. Small waves worked back and forth in the doorway as the water level equalized. Their light beams filled the doorway as a shape floated forward and stuck there. No confusion this time. No wisp or underwater flame. Just a shoulder and a back. Dad walked to the door, looking down at the clothing.

Gideon stepped into the chamber to see the face. The men watched him, rooted. He flinched as if struck, and then his lips peeled back in a bleak wail. Sam’s muscles tightened. The keening hung painfully in the air before melting into something like the word “aw.” Dad and Brick stepped forward and eased Hoot’s body onto the bench inside the doorway. Gideon knelt in a pool of water, his light shining on his brother’s face. His arms fell around the massive body, lifting the shoulders gently to keep them above water. He sat and rested his brother’s head on his lap. Hoot’s face was dark gray and swollen. Gideon looked into the open eyes and broke into sobs that echoed the length of the chamber. Sam stepped in and knelt beside him, helping keep Hoot above the water. Gideon hugged the body so tightly that tendons stood out in his neck. His mouthpiece had fallen out and floated on the water’s surface. Sam retrieved it.

“You need to put your mouthpiece back in,” he said. Gideon didn’t look at him, but began rattling off a prayer.

“Jesus, this boy never done you no harm, so don’t you do him none. Take him home to Mama and Daddy and let him get some rest. He worked so hard.” His voice broke, and he looked to Sam.

“Amen,” Sam said.

“Thank you.”

Sam put his hand on Gideon’s. “It’s hard to lose a brother.” He looked back at the three faces in the door. Dad stared at the water around his legs. “Now get your mouthpiece in. I’m not carrying you out of here, too.”

Getting Hoot’s body out of the chamber was awkward and difficult. By the time they’d rested him on an overturned bolting machine nearby, they all breathed heavily. Gideon stood with his hand on his brother.

“Time to switch out your air packs,” Dad said. “Not much left in these.”

Sam got his on faster this time, and once everyone had fresh oxygen, they counted the remaining packs. Two apiece, including the ones scavenged from this chamber.

“That’s not enough,” Dad said. “We’ve got a long walk out of here.” He put one arm against the chamber and stared at the roof, as if doing math in his head. “New plan. You boys get Hoot to the tables with Julie. There’s one more chamber off the west passage. I’ll see if Big John’s in there, and grab any air packs I can find.”

“By yourself?” Sam said.

“Yep.”

“Bullshit,” Sam said. “Big John’s not gonna be in there. He’s the one we saw earlier. The one that knocked me over in the water. Who else could it be?”



“Most likely,” Dad said. “But we don’t know who was down here when the face broke. Even if it was John, somebody else could be in that chamber. Roger or one of his company fellas, for all I know.” He latched two extra air packs on his belt.

“What if something happens?” Sam avoided specificity.

“Then something happens. We’re in flooded mine. I’m trying to get us out before too many things happen.”

“Don’t know, boss,” Brick said. “Seems risky.”

“Are you boys dumb or just stupid? You don’t get votes. Now who’s got a working watch?” Brick and Guaman raised their hands. “Brick, give me yours. G-Man, you keep an eye on the time. If I’m not back to the break room in half an hour, you boys find a way topside.”

“Okay, boss,” Guaman said, checking the watch he kept tucked in his jacket pocket.

“I don’t care what these guys say,” Sam said. “You’re not going off by yourself.”

“Four men to carry Hoot. One refuge chamber to check. Math says I am.” He took his tobacco canister out of his shirt pocket and stuffed a wad behind his lip. “Now get going.”

Gideon and Guaman moved to Hoot’s body. The lapping water rocked it gently. Gideon grabbed his brother under the arms, while Guaman reached underwater to grab a leg. Dad headed toward a crosscut, but Sam stepped in front of him.

“You’re not going alone.” Face music hissed from the rocks, more frightening than ethereal now.

“Get out of my way.”

Sam looked around the passage, grasping for words that would get to Dad.

“People up there need you.” He pointed through the roof. “Jake, Granma, Danny. What am I gonna say if you don’t come out of here?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Dad said. “Not much to explain. Now get going. We’ve got jobs to do. All of us.” He pushed past Sam and started down the passage, his light casting a box shape on the walls ahead of him.

“You’re doing what Mom did.” Dad stopped, but didn’t turn. “You are. Trying to protect me when I can help.”

“I’m doing my job.” The words echoed behind him as he walked down the passage.

“You bastard.” Sam said it loud enough for everyone to hear. Dad didn’t break his stride as he disappeared around a corner. The light from his headlamp lingered briefly before fading.

“He’ll be fine,” Brick said. “If anybody knows what they’re doing down here, it’s him. We’ll see him in half an hour.” He slapped Sam on the shoulder. “Now come on. It’s gonna take four of us to move Hoot.”

They found it easier to float the body down most of the passages, guiding him with their arms and legs while letting his buoyancy do the rest. Only Gideon held him tight the whole way, keeping one arm under his shoulder, and the other behind his head to keep it above the water. They didn’t speak. The only sounds were the splashing water and an occasional creak from the rocks around them. Halfway, a moan escaped from Hoot’s throat, and Brick stumbled back, falling into the water. Hoot’s body rolled on its side, but Gideon righted him, glaring at Brick. “It’s only gas leaving his stomach,” Guaman said,

as if he encountered it daily. They moved faster, making it to the break room with fifteen minutes left for Dad. They laid Hoot out on a second table beside Julie. Both wore peaceful expressions, though no one could get Hoot's eyes to close.

"Somebody oughta say something," Brick said after they finished.

"I done said my piece," Gideon whispered. His weariness made Sam uneasy.

"Sam?"

"I can't." He'd offered an amen for Hoot, but now he was too worried about Dad, and Julie's presence was more than he could put into words.

"Well, I'm not much for church," Brick said. "I wouldn't know what to say."

They stared at each other a while, and Sam began to feel silly.

"I'll speak," Guaman said. He'd been leaning against the wall, but he stepped forward now, facing the head of each body. "You won't understand." He closed his eyes and spoke in Spanish. His voice echoed softly between the walls, blending with the lapping sound of water. Sam closed his eyes. If Julie's soul had left her body, if such things happened, it must have sounded like this.

They stood a while after the words stopped, not knowing what else to do. The Tupperware still banged against the rock with hollow thuds.

"So what's the first thing you fellas are gonna do when we get out of here?" Brick asked, leaning against one of the few standing cabinets. "I'm gonna hug my little boy. Then I'm gonna get a cheeseburger at the Cozy Cove in Oakland." He looked up for a moment. "A double cheeseburger." He tried to laugh. No one else did.

"Guess I'll be getting in touch with family back home," Gideon said. "They'll wanna know." He put his hand on Hoot's shoulder. "Not sure who's around anymore,

except my sister.” The other three looked at the floor. “Course, I might have a cheeseburger, too.” He offered a thin smile. “What about you, G-Man?”

Guaman looked around. He’d been quiet since finding them in the refuge chamber. “I never cared for cheeseburgers. I’m going to eat my wife’s cooking. And while she cooks, I’ll hug my Beatriz and tickle her feet until she laughs. I haven’t heard her laugh yet.”

“How old is she?” Brick said.

“Nine months.”

“And she’s not laughed yet?”

“Pilar says she laughs while I’m at work, but I don’t believe it. She’s a very serious girl.” Sam smiled. He missed Pilar and Beatriz, too. “And you, chochera? What will you do first?”

Sam considered the question, but had no answer. He could hug Pilar and Beatriz, but then he would have to leave them. If Dad didn’t appear soon, he might join Gideon, bearing news to Granma and Jake that they wouldn’t want to hear. What else could he do? A cheeseburger sounded good, but he was hungry. No wife to embrace, no child to spoil. No friends topside to tackle out of sheer joy. If Gideon was right, and the mine closed, what would he even do here anymore? He glanced at Julie’s body, her hair drying a muddy gray from the coal. He could go to her boys, tell them how wonderful their mother was. But he hadn’t known her as a mother, beyond her short instructions to her boys on the way out the door. What would he do if he walked out of the mine entrance alive? He’d look at the sky, he supposed. Really look at it. That felt important now, because it wasn’t guaranteed.

“You guys can keep your burgers and tamales,” he said instead. “My granma’s cooking for me.”

The men smiled. “What’s she gonna cook?” Brick said.

“One of everything.”

“And what time will that be?” Guaman said, looking at his watch for effect. His smile faded.

“How long?” Sam said.

“Thirty-five minutes.”

Brick exhaled. “We should get moving. Sorry, Sam.”

“No,” Sam said. “We can wait.”

“We can’t,” Gideon said. “Your daddy knows what he’s doing. He says thirty minutes, it’s thirty minutes.”

“Bullshit,” Sam said. “He doesn’t know everything. Trust me. I could tell you stories that’d make you think twice about listening to Mister Fireboss.”

“I doubt that,” Brick said. “He may be a shitty dad, but that don’t matter down here.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sam said. Dad got his way without being here. Probably buried under a cave-in somewhere and still calling the shots.

“If he’s out there, he’ll find us,” Gideon said. “If he ain’t, waiting’s not gonna help.”

“What’s the harm in ten more minutes?” He couldn’t mask his pleading. “The water’s going down. The worst is over.”

“We don’t know that,” Guaman said. “The roof will keep falling. The paths out won’t last. He would not want you to wait.”

For the first time, Sam felt anger toward Guaman. “Well as long as Dad gets what he wants, he can die happy, I guess.” He tried to kick the wall, but the water slowed it to a gentle tap. He put his hands against the rock instead, staring down at the swirling surface. Too much loss. Julie on a cold table. Dad lost to the darkness. Gideon’s brother gone. A brother. The competing pains churned in his mind, and his head ached from hitting the refuge chamber. The rock felt pliant beneath his hands, greasy. He sucked in several chemical breaths, and when he turned, the men had pulled their coats and supplies back onto their soggy bodies.

“Take your goodbyes now, fellas,” Brick said. “No guarantees anybody’s coming back this way.” He slapped his hand on Hoot’s foot, held it there for a moment, and then turned and started walking. Guaman looked at the bodies and closed his eyes briefly. Gideon leaned over and whispered something in Hoot’s ear. Sam took a last glance at Julie. A strand of hair had fallen over one eye. He eased it aside with his left hand, but it didn’t look right somehow, so he put it back. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, cold on his lips, and then backed away several steps before turning.

Marching uphill, they stayed in the center passage until they met a sloping wall of black rock blocking the way. When Guaman had mentioned the fallen top, Sam had wondered if a person could dig through it. He saw now that it would require machinery like the continuous miner.

“Wonder if they’re digging through on the other side,” Sam said. None of them stepped close to the rocks. A jagged edge of roof hung loosely above them. The water level had dropped below Sam’s knees.

“Not yet,” Gideon said. “What’s it been, twelve hours?”

Guaman looked at his watch. “Eleven.”

“Eleven,” Gideon echoed. “Doubt the feds have let anybody down here yet.”

“And if they have, I doubt this is the only fall they’re digging through,” Brick said. “Could be blowouts like this every fifty feet between here and the door.” The idea made Sam feel heavy, as if another step would be too much. It would be easier to turn back. Find Dad.

“Which way did you go from here, G-Man?” Brick asked.

“To the left. There’s no path that way.”

“Well then, I guess we go right and see where the chips fall.”

They moved past three crosscuts before they hit more fall, and the water level dropped completely, leaving only thick mud that clung to their boots. Some lighter rocks mixed with the coal. “Limestone,” Brick said. “We’re moving up.” Two more stairstep turns moved them a hundred feet, but when they went right the third time, they found themselves facing the beltline. It sat silent, halted by a combination of electrical failure, fallen top, and water damage.

“Looks like it put up a fight,” Gideon said, leaning in and looking it over. “Belt’s busted.” The gears and axles still hung below, stained black from friction. Gideon slapped one and it spun freely, filling the passage with a whirring sound. The galvanized belt had disappeared.

“That’s a shame,” Brick said. “We could’ve climbed on and crawled out. Even had protection from bad top.” He slapped the steel cover curving over the beltline.

“Guaman, you run the sensor line, right?” Sam said, pointing to the wire that ran above the beltline cover. A small sensor box hung every few feet, ready to alert the control room if it detected smoke from the beltline.

“Sometimes.”

“So there’s enough room to get up there and check it, right?”

“Yes. It’s tight.”

“And the cover holds you?”

“Oh yes. It’s stronger than it looks.”

Sam looked down the long passage containing the beltline. No room to walk beside it, but if there was room above it, they might have a shot.

“Why can’t we just climb on top and scoot all the way out of here?”

They looked at the rusty contraption. Sam saw it clearly in his head. It’d be hard, but how much further could it be?

A sound rose from the other side of the beltline. Boots in mud.

“Because it’s smashed to shit under twelve tons of rock about twenty yards up.” A helmet light shone through the beltline, but Sam recognized Dad’s voice before he saw his face.

“Why am I not surprised?” Brick said.

“What are you doing here?” Sam said as Dad eased himself through the beltline assembly. “Why didn’t you meet us?”

“Was anyone in the chamber?” Guaman said.



Dad shook his head. “Your guess is as good as mine. Top fell in all around it, tighter than a drum. I hollered, but didn’t hear anything from the other side. John could be in there, but I doubt it. I hollered for a while, then came looking for you boys. When I didn’t find you in the break room, I headed up to check the way out. Figured you’d be along soon enough.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Everything leads here.”

“So the beltline’s it,” Gideon said. “And it’s busted.”

“I guess we wait for the feds, then,” Brick said. “Hot damn.”

“We ain’t waiting for no feds,” Dad said.

“Did I miss something?” Sam said. “You just said there’s no other way.”

“Clean out your ears, son. Gideon said that. And Gideon ain’t worked these mines as long as I have.”

“There’s another way?” Guaman said.

“Not one I like,” Dad said, “but yeah. Back in the seventies, Ohio Valley Mining owned this property, and they mined out a stretch just south of here. When it shut down in the eighties, we closed it off. When Black Stallion bought the rights a few years back, they used the old entrance, but cut to the right.” He looked at them. “Didn’t any of you jokers ever notice the big right turn when you head down here?” They looked at each other. “Anyway, the side wall of the mine’s fifty feet that way.” He pointed through the beltline assembly. “Sealed up with cinderblocks and concrete. We find it, we can get into that seal and work our way out.”

“Won’t it be flooded, too?” Sam asked.

“Could be, but probably not from this mess today. It’s closed up tight. If it ain’t flooded over the years, should be dry enough for us. Still two extra packs apiece?” They

checked their belts. “Good.” He worked the wad of tobacco in his mouth. “We’ll need them. Come on.” He turned and stepped back through the beltline assembly, and everyone else followed in turn.

“So if this is a straight path out, why didn’t we try this first?” Brick said as he squeezed through.

“When you see it, you’ll have your answer,” Gideon said, following him.

Sam and Guaman came last, and Sam looked at his friend as they waited for Gideon to crawl through. His mouth pointed downward at its edges.

“You okay?” Sam asked.

“I won’t be okay until I see my family. I have known men who died in mines, chochera.” He started to say more, but didn’t. His terror was suddenly apparent to Sam. He’d been so reliable over the past few months. Ready to help. Interested in Sam and his music. Now he walked along the dark passage, hunched and afraid.

“We’ll get out.” Sam didn’t believe it, really. But maybe Guaman was his reason for trying.

“Even if we do, some don’t.” He lowered his voice. “Gideon leaves his brother behind. My brother is safe in Peru. He sells cars. Have I told you this?”

“No,” Sam said, imagining someone like Guaman selling cars. “But that’s good. And Gideon will be okay. I lost a brother once, and I’m okay.” Gideon surely heard the lie in his voice, but his shoulders raised and he kept walking.

A few junctions past the beltline, Dad stopped at a solid wall, the end of the crosscut. He leaned against it and passed his hands over different spots, as if searching for a secret lever.

“Something under the dirt?” Sam said.

“There is,” Dad said. “I put it there.” He found a bulge in the wall and began digging at it. “G-Man, give me a hand here.” Guaman, the smallest of them, took a knee beside Dad and shoveled at the wall with his helmet. They dug for a while, stopping when the plastic hit something hard. Dad reached down and scraped with his fingers. When he stepped back, the lights revealed a busted cinder block.

“What are we looking at?” Sam said.

“Mine seal,” Brick said. “Pretty shitty one from the look of it.”

“It was the eighties,” Dad said. “And if it wasn’t shitty, we’d be out of options.”

“Why’s it shitty?” Sam said.

“A mine seal’s gotta be more than cracked concrete,” Gideon said. “Used to be you could get away with this. Now, the feds’d crap their pants they saw this. Gotta worry about hydraulic pressure, water leakage. Whole nine yards.”

“So what’s on the other side? More of the same?”

“Sort of,” Dad said. “Passages were wider then, roof bolts further apart.”

“Sounds safe.”

“Bad top’s not the problem,” Dad said. “We get through this wall, we’re gonna find out real fast if it’s flooded or not. If it is, we’re in trouble.”

“You think it’s flooded?” Gideon said.

“No,” Dad said. “I don’t.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Sam said.

“Not really,” Dad said. “Dry mine, closed off, no ventilation. Lot of methane in there.”

“Shit,” Brick said.

“But we’ve got the self-rescuers,” Sam said. “They’ll last a while.”

“We can breathe,” Dad said, “but if it’s over ten percent, any little spark’ll light the whole thing up.”

“This happens in Peru,” Guaman said, his breath rising through his helmet beam.

Brick turned to Guaman. “I thought you were Mexican.”

“Nope,” Guaman said. “But I like their food.”

“Learn something new everyday,” Dad said. “Now listen, boys. We dig this thing out a little more, we should be able to knock a hole big enough to crawl through.” He checked the watch Brick had given him. “Fresh air packs before you go through. All our gear’s permissible. No sparks can get to the air. Your boot soles should be rubber.” He knelt and put his helmet back on, inspecting everyone’s shoes. He wiped mud from Sam’s and took a long look, then stood up. “We’re good. The trick’s gonna be static electricity. I’ll take a methane reading on the other side. If it’s ten percent or higher, we’re gonna be in deep shit. You don’t talk, touch each other, touch the walls, rub your clothes together, nothing. Don’t even drag your feet. You follow me, and keep five feet between you. Clear?” Everyone nodded. “Okay, let’s get to it.”

The dirt and mud fell away, revealing a cinderblock wall about four feet tall and three feet wide. Where it met the rock wall, one of the blocks had busted. Dad slipped his fingers into the crack and pulled. A large chunk fell onto the ground in front of him, leaving a squarish opening.

“Anybody got a hammer?” They looked at each other. Guaman reached into one of the long pockets on his pants and pulled out a flathead screwdriver mostly covered in electrical tape.

“Will this work?” He handed it to Dad.

“Might.” He stuck it the mortar between two blocks and slapped it hard. Nothing happened. He slapped it again, harder, and the blade sunk into the mortar. “Dammit,” Dad said, shaking his hand and flexing it a few times. He grabbed the handle and wiggled it back and forth. Mortar dust fell to the ground, a grayish cloud in the light beams. He moved around the edge of the block and the one beneath it, and then worked at the blocks until he opened a small oval. “Brick, you got any gloves?”

“Sure do, boss.” He stepped forward and pulled a pair of leather work gloves out of his back pocket, still dripping with water.

“Good,” Dad said. “See if you can get a grip there.” He pointed at the oval. “You get your fingers in there, you pull hard as you can.”

“And if the other side’s flooded?”

“We’ll catch you.”

Brick turned toward the seal, cupping his hands and looping his fingers in the opening. Sam stepped back with the others as Brick bent his knees and widened his stance.

“Here goes nothing.” He jerked back hard and let out a growl. Something cracked, but the blocks didn’t move.

“Need some help?” Gideon asked, stepping forward.

Brick growled again, louder this time. His exposed skin turned deep red. He went momentarily silent and then tumbled backward. Pieces of cinderblock rained down on him.

“Ow,” he said, lying on the muddy floor. “Shit.” Chunks of block lay scattered around him and a dust cloud hung in the air, punctured by their headlamps.

“You okay?” Dad said.

Brick stood up and tested his legs, making a face when he pushed down with the left one. “Guess I will be.”

“No water,” Dad said, nodding at the opening. A jagged hole had opened, just big enough for a man to squeeze through. He peered through it. “Level on the other side. Keep those masks tight, and try to land soft on the other side.” He leaned forward and disappeared through the opening like a snake crawling into its hole. Guaman watched as Brick tumbled through, and then looked at Sam and shook his head. Gideon looked at Guaman and gestured toward the hole.

“Fellas from Peru can go first.”

The rough edges bit into Sam’s work clothes as he squeezed through after Guaman. In thinner clothes, he would have been sliced on all sides. The hole sat low enough to the ground that he could put his hands on the soft dirt of the floor before he was halfway through, lowering himself carefully as his legs slipped over the blocks. Rising to his feet, he looked around to see a familiar environment that felt swollen somehow. The passageways still ran straight with crosscuts at regular intervals, but the proportions were wrong. He tried to stand and bumped his head. The roof hung no more than five feet above the floor. Wider passages, but shorter. The bolts held large round

plates instead of the square ones from the other side. The same chalky rock dust coated the surfaces.

Guaman gestured for Sam to move. No sooner had he taken a step than Gideon dropped silently on the floor where he'd been standing. Dad stepped forward, holding the methane detector. He raised it close to their faces and pointed to a bright red "25" in digital numbers. Brick's eyes grew large and Gideon's closed. If Guaman reacted, Sam couldn't see it. Dad latched the monitor back to his belt, leaned in closer, and whispered.

"Any kind of spark ignites the methane." Through the mouthpiece, Sam could barely hear him. "Be careful. Roof's low. Gonna be a hard walk. Stay on your feet and don't drag them." He stood as upright as he could and started walking, turning left into the first passage. They fell in behind him, Sam first, then Guaman and Gideon, with Brick bringing up the rear.

No one spoke as they aped Dad's exaggerated steps. After a while, Sam's back started to ache from the combination of muscle tension and hunched walking. His head still throbbed. Some bolts stuck two or three inches out of the roof, and Sam feared tapping one with his helmet and igniting the air around him. The men's breath grew ragged and tinny through their masks. Brick lagged behind, and it became apparent he'd hurt his leg when the blocks fell on him. Each time Gideon turned to help him, he picked up his pace and rejoined the line. Beyond breathing and footfalls, no noises echoed in the long chamber. No air movement or fans, no rumble of machinery. Sam's blood thundered in his ears.

Here and there, a lone wire dangled from the roof, but most equipment had been pulled out before the seals went up. Small bits of rock littered the passage floor, evidence

of the roof's slow attrition. Eventually, they found a large pile of fall blocking the passage ahead. Without missing a step, Dad turned right into the crosscut, then left, and left again. Another right brought them back the original passage. A small barrel rested against the wall, covered with dust. On top sat a rectangular object, an inch thick and partially flattened on one side. Though also covered with dust, it had some sort of shape or pattern on its surface. As he walked past, Sam recognized it. A half-empty pack of cigarettes.

Nothing else distracted Sam as the weary march continued. His back muscles burned. Sweat rolled off his nose and fell in splashes on the dust, loud enough to hear between footfalls. His focus drifted from the dry walls to dangling wires, from footfalls to hitched breaths. Dad's bent frame filled the passageway ahead.

Sam had ridden on those shoulders as a boy, squealing with glee and shouting "enough!" when Dad went too high or too fast. He'd watched those arms and hands bury themselves in the guts of a dozen trucks, coming out smeared with oil and grease. They'd wrapped themselves tight around Sam and Jake as Danny lay dead in a hospital bed, as if trying to hold the life in his remaining boys. Mom had embraced them often when they were younger. The soft flesh of her upper arms. The faint vanilla scent of her hair. Sam had no sense memory of Dad's arms. He remembered the embrace, but not the sensation.

Dad became his vanishing point, caked in blackish gray dirt that cracked where it had dried. It moved with him, flexing like skin. Dad's embrace was surely a skin of hard dirt. The burn in Sam's back became a knot. The chemical air from the mouthpiece left a slick patch of mucus in the back of his throat. Sensation became perception. The mud, the pain, his mother's arms, his father's, Julie's. He felt his lost fingers. With each step, he



flexed them. Felt the muscles contract. They moved in rhythm, slow at first, painfully, and then faster. At the tips, he felt the wound steel and nickel of the Les Paul he'd sold before leaving Nashville. Left the money in an envelope under Julie's door. Not Julie. Someone else. His fingers danced across the strings. At first the frets only buzzed, but as he played, music filled the passageway. Zeppelin, Aerosmith, GN'R, Thin Lizzy. Riffs bounced from the stone walls and fell back on him, changed, complete. Water ran down his face leaving flesh trails through blackness. The cool lines felt like wounds or caresses.

Dad halted suddenly, turning to look at the miners. Sam tried to stop, but his upper body, tipped past its center of gravity, carried him over. He reached for Dad to break his fall, but as his hands tried to close Dad's arm, it pulled away. Sam toppled over, but caught himself with his hands before the rest of his body made contact with the dusty floor.

"You okay?" Dad whispered through his mouthpiece.

Sam lowered his knees to the floor and rocked carefully back onto his feet. The scars on his hand had split. Blood ran down his arm. He stood and looked at Dad. *Why did you let me fall?* he wanted to ask, but the answer came before the words. He couldn't risk the spark.

"I'm fine." Sam started to wipe his hand on his dirty jacket, but thought better of it. He turned and looked behind him. The men looked different. Their eyes had sunk, and the light reflected in them seemed opaque.

"This is far enough," Dad said, waving them closer. He pointed to his right. The crosscut ended in a cinderblock wall, cracked worse than the first one. Roof fall lay in a heap on the floor in front of it, creating a narrow crawlspace. "All the seals for the last

half mile are like this. Compromised the roof when we put them in, most likely. This one's better than the others, and we've gone far enough to get past the water damage." He raised the methane detector from his belt and showed it to them. The red numbers showed twenty percent. "Better. Still too high."

"What's the plan, boss?" Brick said, his voice a rasp. The walk had done him in. He reached twice to rest his arm on the wall, but stopped both times.

"Two smallest fellas here are Gideon and G-Man," Dad said, standing with his hands unnaturally away from his sides. "They're gonna crawl up and brace themselves against the crack in that seal. We'll push their feet. It works, they'll poke through the other side."

"What about the static?" Sam said.

"Boots got rubber soles. Rock's dusty." Dad's breath gurgled in his mouthpiece. He sounded tired. "Nothing's for sure," he said, looking at Sam. "But we try anyway."

Gideon and Guaman gently piled their remaining self-rescuers and the few supplies they carried, and then knelt on the edge of the rocks. They kept as much distance between themselves as they could without touching the walls. "Easy, boys," Dad whispered as they crawled forward. The noise of breathing through the air packs grew faint, except for Brick, who still sucked air mightily.

"Set, boss," Gideon said from within the crevice. Their legs went rigid. Brick knelt down shakily behind Gideon. Sam and Dad knelt at Guaman's feet.

"Keep control," Dad said to them as he placed his hands on Guaman's boot. Sam did the same, and Brick braced himself against Gideon. "One, two, three," Dad whispered, and then the three of them drove forward, grunting. Sam pushed until he felt

lightheaded, trying to keep his foothold. He wanted to stop, but Dad pushed harder beside him. He would have to stop. His aching back and fatigued muscles faded. Then Guaman's boot gave beneath his hands. He nearly toppled forward, but Dad's hand grasped the back of his jacket and they stayed on their feet.

"We're through." Guaman's voice sounded far away.

"Might take a minute," Gideon said. "Dammit!"

"You okay?" Brick said. His eyes were half closed and sweat stood out on his face in fat drops. The words ran together into something like "yoky."

"Yeah," Gideon said. "Just smashed the shit out of my finger."

"What about you?" Dad said to Brick. "You gonna make it?"

"Yeah." Brick opened his eyes wider and smiled. "Just a lot for a fat boy like me."

They squatted, watching Guaman and Gideon disappear further into the broken seal. Finally, their boots dropped out of sight. The dark opening leered at them, and then Guaman's head popped up.

"We're just below the doors," he said. "It's dry."

"Thank Christ," Brick said.

"That's good," Dad said. "Now you two get around the corner. Keep those masks on. Methane's following you through."

"We'll help you through first," Gideon said.

"You got through," Dad said. "We will, too. Now get." They disappeared.

"You're next, son."

Sam wanted to argue that Brick should go first, but the thought of breathing fresh air moved his feet forward. He slid through the opening more easily than the early one, falling on soft, dry dirt. He turned and looked back. Brick's shoulders heaved.

"I'll help him," Sam said to Dad, framed in the busted seal.

"Get your ass around the corner," Dad said. "Now."

Sam turned and walked to the main passage, too tired to argue. To the right, he found Gideon and Guaman leaning against the wall.

"The others are coming?" Guaman asked.

"Right behind me. Brick's not—"

A blue-white flash blinded Sam, followed by a percussive boom that hit painfully across his torso. He couldn't see, and couldn't get to his feet. His arms and legs flailed and his mid-section twisted as he tried to find some sign of up or down. He'd lost his helmet, and for a split second feared his head would shatter against the rock walls. Then he hit the dusty ground, landing on his back and side. His joints cracked like knuckles, and dirt drove itself down his collar as he skidded along the floor, finally stopping at the base of a wall. He tried to look around, but only saw a bright wash. For a panicked moment he thought he'd been blinded, but staring ahead, he found ghostly silhouettes of particles in his vision. He lay on the floor, waiting for his vision to clear, aching all over. A sharp whine rose nearby, as if the continuous miner ran a few feet from his head. He tried to speak, felt air move over his vocal cords, but couldn't hear his voice. He wanted to close his eyes and rest until someone found him, but he pushed himself to his elbows and stared ahead, blinking to clear his sight. Small bits of rock fell around him. One landed hard on his leg.

A light flickered to his left, crescent-shaped, like a waning moon. He pushed himself upright and rolled onto his hands and knees. Pain engulfed most of his joints. He crawled toward the curved light. It disappeared as he bumped against something. His helmet, resting on its side against the wall of the passage, the headlamp still on. He touched it and felt a crack along the top ridge. He put it on his head anyway. It sat at an odd angle, the light shining down and to the right. He ran his hand slowly up the coarse wall and stood. His back didn't feel right. He tried to speak again, hearing himself faintly this time over the whining sound.

"Dad? Guaman?" He stepped forward, not sure if he moved toward the seal or away from it. "Anybody there?" He called out twice before he heard a response. He couldn't tell if the voice whispered or shouted.

"Here. Over here, chochera."

Guaman's small body filled a corner where the wall met the floor. Sam offered a hand, pulling him to his feet. His back screamed in protest. Guaman grimaced, also in pain. Sam tilted his helmet to shine light on his face. A deep gash ran across Guaman's forehead, covering his face in a red sheet.

"Are you okay?" Sam said. Guaman put his hand to his face, wiping away blood.

"I don't know. Is it deep?"

"I don't think so." The blood had already started to congeal. "Where's Gideon?"

"Over here." Gideon's voice echoed across the passage. They found him sitting against the opposite wall. "Leg's broke." His face had gone gray.

"We'll get you out of here," Sam said. "We're practically out." He turned toward the seal. "Dad, Brick, we're gonna need help," he shouted. "Dad! Brick!" His helmet lit

the dust hanging in the air, but couldn't cut through it. He walked into the crosscut, and his stomach tightened. Debris littered the passage. The seal should have been in front of him. Instead, a pile of rock angled to the roof. He tried to call for Dad and Brick again, but his throat had turned to sandpaper. He swung his head despite back pain, trying to train the beam on anything other than rock. A sleeve, a helmet. Anything.

Something gold flashed in the corner of his eye. He turned and stumbled forward, falling onto the pile of rocks. He flung several aside and found a hand beneath the last one, a gold wedding band tight on the third finger. The skin was ghastly white and cold. No pulse. He pulled as hard as he could with his good hand. He pulled as the pain in his back flared and he screamed and screamed again. A hand fell on his shoulder and he kept screaming.

"Let go," Guaman said. "He's gone."

"I've got to get him out of the way. Dad's in there. On the other side of these rocks." He pulled again. "Help me!"

"I am so sorry, chochera." Guaman's hand tightened on his shoulder. "There is nothing on the other side."

Guaman's words rung in his head but made no sense. He'd just seen Dad, looked at him through the open seal, his bottom lip full of Skoal. His helmet slightly crooked on his head. Sam looked at the pile of rocks, at Brick's lifeless hand, and the words snapped into place. There was no passage. It was all gone.

He fell backward and hit rock. Guaman caught him under his arms and lowered him to the ground, gripping him tightly. Sam opened his mouth, trying to scream again, but the only sound that came out was a small hiss, like a leaky tire. He put his arms

around Guaman and they sat there, splayed on the floor, waiting for the wail to come. After a gasping breath, it did.

“We must go,” Guaman said when Sam quieted. “There is nowhere safe down here now. The top could come down anywhere. Everywhere.” Sam took his offered hand and rose. “I’m surprised we’re alive.”

Sam didn’t feel alive. He felt buried under the rocks. Locked in the ground forever. But he stepped forward when Guaman did, because Dad would have. They made their way back to Gideon and hoisted him up between them. He was conscious, but when Guaman said his name, he only mumbled. They walked forward, arm in arm, forced at last to leave the others behind.

They walked a while before lights flashed on their left. “Over here!” someone shouted. Half a dozen men surrounded them, all wearing yellow coveralls. They spoke, but Sam lost their words. “Okay,” they said several times, and “safe.” A blanket fell over his shoulders. He resisted as they pulled Gideon away, but he had no strength left. Guaman closed the gap, and Sam walked forward with his arm around his friend.

At the mine entrance, men loaded Gideon into an ambulance and sped off. Others helped Sam and Guaman into a mantrip. Their arms slid from each other’s shoulders as they climbed in, but their hands clasped as they sat. The sky hung dark above them, though the first light of morning glowed ahead as they drove around the cliff face. They marveled at its beauty, a faint purplish glow in the eastern sky. Further up, countless stars still filled the darkness, and the rich belt of the Milky Way stretched across it. Orion’s raised hand dipped into the silvery band.

As the mantrip rounded another corner, the stars faded behind intense brightness. Vans and trucks packed the mine lot to bursting, most topped with massive antennae. Several had network logos or channel numbers on their sides. Camera lights glared everywhere, and the sound of a helicopter beat dully somewhere above. Countless people stood behind barricades, and Sam wondered if they'd been there all night. His still couldn't hear well, but a roar bellowed from the crowd as they drove closer. The onlookers moved in convulsive waves. Sam worried the mantrip would take them into the center of the mob. He squeezed Guaman's hand, but they veered right, and the madness faded as the mantrip ducked behind the main office building.

They squelched to a halt and Sam looked around. The faces of aboveground workers stood out here and there, and Sam recognized a few from his days in the machine shop. Then Roger's face filled Sam's vision. "I'm so glad you're okay," he said. "We've been worried sick up here." He tried to say more, but the company man pulled him away. Sam couldn't remember his name. The men in yellow coveralls helped them from the bed of the mantrip, and they both stumbled as their feet dropped onto the gravel. "We need you to see the paramedics," one of them said, pointing them toward another ambulance. A shriek went up nearby, and they turned to see Pilar barrel through the police tape toward Guaman. She held Beatriz tight in her arms. When Guaman saw them, his hand dropped from Sam's, but before he turned away, he whispered in Sam's ear. "It will be all right, chochera." Then he faded in the oncoming blur of his wife and daughter.

Sam took a few steps toward the ambulance. "Sam!" another voice said. "Sam! Over here!" He turned and looked. He didn't see anyone. Men ran back and forth, and the strobing ambulance lights made it hard to see. At last, illuminated in red and blue flashes,



he found Jake. He walked toward his brother. Libby stood beside him, gripping Jake's arm tightly in her own. Danny wasn't there, but Granma stood on Jake's other side, tears pouring from her eyes. He stumbled the last few steps and fell onto his brother, grasping him tightly in his filthy arms. They stayed that way for a while, and when Sam stepped back, Granma looked at him.

“Where's Jesse?”

Sam tried to find words, but looked to Jake instead. Behind his brother, the morning light grew, blossoming from purple to pink.

## Epilogue

The snow fell off and on all day. The weatherman predicted a blizzard, but as usual, he exaggerated. Three inches carpeted the ground. No small accumulation for southern Indiana, but not a blizzard. Spindly tree limbs grabbed the fat flakes greedily, and soon their branches hung low. Occasionally, a truck crept down the road between Dad's house and Guaman's, but beyond those intrusions, the landscape waited, like the frozen pond at its center, in a moment not yet complete.

Sam watched from Dad's couch as starlings dived low over the yard, looking for a quick meal. Finding nothing, they swung back up and disappeared into the trees at the edge of the yard. Sam still called it Dad's house, though Dad had been gone for nearly three months. Sam had kept to the apartment for a while after the accident, but when he decided to leave Indiana, he chose to stay at Dad's until his departure. He'd expected to leave today, but the snow postponed his plans. Which was fine. He wasn't on a schedule.

Guaman had pulled out yesterday, his truck towing a small trailer. Sam had walked over to see him off. There'd been no snow, and they stood in their jackets making small talk. Sam had played guitar a few more times at Guaman's church and knew a few of the members by name. Guaman told him that Carlos, the drummer, got a job at a

factory in Jasper. It came with insurance, including dental and vision. He'd be making office furniture. The news made Sam happy. As they talked, Pilar tucked some final items behind the seat of their truck while Beatriz shuffled along behind her in a puffy winter coat. Sam smiled at her and waved. Beatriz laughed and jumped behind the front end of the truck, hiding from him. Pilar said something to her in Spanish, laughing at the reply. She tried to find room behind the seat for the drawings from the entryway of the house. Sam still couldn't make out the strange writing in the dialogue bubbles, but the Inca and the Spaniard continued to discuss the gold between them.

Sam had chatted plenty over the last few months. Much more than he wanted to. The first weeks had the worst. He'd expected nightmares, but none came. Instead, he slept dreamlessly, awaking each morning to precious seconds of forgetfulness. Then he would remember. Dad. Julie. Hoot. Brick. John. He wept some mornings. Others, he just felt an emptiness that drove him back to sleep. Jake and Libby stopped by occasionally, and he would listen as they talked, but he had little to say.

Amid the grieving, he, Gideon, and Guaman had gotten nonstop calls from news agencies, wanting phone interviews, sit down interviews, broadcast interviews. Guaman refused from the beginning, and conveniently lost his ability to speak English when they persisted.

Gideon and Sam took some phone interviews, but grew irritated by the thin stories that were published. Once Gideon left the hospital, they sat down with a cable network to correct some of the inaccuracies they'd heard. The interviewer, a news anchor carved from granite, gushed sympathy, but asked no useful questions. He didn't care why the accident happened. Why the mine pushed too far too fast. He wanted the human story.

“You both lost family members in the accident,” he said. “How does it feel to survive when they didn’t?”

The question hung in the air. Sam looked at Gideon, who nodded for Sam to answer.

“You ever have a relative die?” Sam said to the anchor, who cleared his throat and mumbled an affirmative. “And you’re still alive, right?” The anchor looked at him, confused. “It feels a lot like that.” The next question went to Gideon, asking if he’d like to share any thoughts on the loss of his brother.

“No,” Gideon said.

Though Sam missed most of it, Jake said that Arthur and Winslow turned into a carnival for several days. News trucks barreling down the roads, lines out the doors of the few restaurants nearby. The Trading Post ran out of food. Dad would have enjoyed that. Soon enough, the trucks disappeared, surrendering the roads back to the coal haulers. After complaints about ruts in a few yards and a brief spike in gas prices, the towns returned to normal.

The second week, they buried Dad at the cemetery in Winslow. The recent rain made the ground muddy, and some of the folding chairs poked through the strip of Astroturf they rolled out for funerals. Jake didn’t want to officiate, so old Pastor Ennis took over the duties. His paper-thin voice delivered a good message, short and uplifting, and then they laid Dad between Danny’s grave and Mom’s empty space.

Everyone tracked mud into the church fellowship hall afterward, but no one cared. Granma held court, matriarch of both church and family, and though her eyes often grew wet, she conversed with everyone. Sam watched her with awe as he shook a few hands.

He recognized faces, but knew few names. Eventually he disappeared behind the coat rack to play Ninja Turtles with Danny.

Afterward, Sam found himself at Granma's kitchen table, along with Jake and Libby, eating one of the dozen casseroles that had been dropped off for them. He ate, but didn't taste. "Chicken's a little tough," Granma said, but had two helpings. They sat and talked for a long time after eating, sometimes of Dad, sometimes of Granddad, and once of Great-Great-Uncle Revis. Granma laughed as she explained how Dad would disappear for hours at a time as a boy. The first time, she panicked, sure he'd been kidnapped. Each time, though, she found him asleep under a blanket somewhere. "How he didn't suffocate, I'll never know," she said. Before they left, Jake and Sam asked her if she needed one of them to stay with her. "No. I'm used to sleeping alone." She put a hand on each of their shoulders. "You're good boys. Jesse was proud of you both. Now, go on. Hoosiers play at eight. I'll be fine." She turned and disappeared behind her screen door. Jake and Sam stood on the porch as the deadbolt slid home.

"Miracles never cease," Jake said. His breath misted in front of him. Libby sat in their minivan, playing some sort of hand gesture game with Danny.

"So they say." Sam stuffed his hands in his pocket. The bad one still hurt in cold weather. "You and Libby gonna be okay?"

"I think so, but you know what they say. If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

Sam nodded. When he'd walked into the church last summer and found Jake standing behind the pulpit, he thought he knew his brother. He thought he knew a lot of things.

For the next month and a half, he worked to get his affairs and Dad's both sorted out, the latter with Jake's help. Between workers' comp and a settlement from Black Stallion he hoped bankrupted them, money wouldn't be an issue for a while. The week before Christmas, he wrote a check for ten thousand dollars and drove to Campbelltown. Julie's trailer still sat the end of the long gravel driveway. Halloween decorations hung in the windows. The explosion permanently sealed the lower levels of the mine, so there had been no funeral for Julie, Hoot, or Big John. The *Dispatch* ran a nice obituary with Julie's senior picture above it. He knocked on the door of the main house, and Julie's mother came to the door. She looked at him, and he apologized for not having come sooner.

"Things have been crazy," he said.

"They have."

He tried to explain himself, but fell over his words.

"Slow down, son," she said.

"Okay." He took a breath. "Listen, I don't know what the mine did for you and the boys, but I want them to have this." He handed her the check, and her eyes grew round when she looked at it. They stared at each other, making Sam uncomfortable. "I was just gonna leave it in the mailbox, but—"

"We can't take this." Her voice cracked. "We're not—" She stopped and looked back down at the check.

"It's not for you. And it's not for their dad. It's for the boys. You spend it on them however you see fit." He started to turn. "Only, spend some of it on whatever video game system they want, and four or five games. Ma'am." He tipped his ball cap and walked back to his truck. Driving home, he thought of Julie's picture in the *Dispatch*. He'd gone

with her to take it the summer between junior and senior year. What if they'd stayed together then? What if he'd married her instead of Jason Kirby? Would he have loved her enough if he'd never left? He wasn't sure, but without her he couldn't stay. The life he'd envisioned had been sealed in the mine with her.

On Saturdays, he and Jake sorted through Dad's meager belongings. A checking account and some savings bonds which they transferred to Granma's name. Some old Super-8 home movies that Jake took with the promise of converting them to digital. Sam took the albums and the record player. They each kept a few items of clothing and hauled the rest to Goodwill. In a tied-off sock at the bottom of one drawer, they found a handful of gold coins, which they split.

Sam came across the letters in mid-December. Jake was stuck at rehearsal for the church Christmas pageant, so Sam started without him. Dad's story of Mom going to California had lingered, and he suspected he'd find their correspondence in the top drawer with his few other mementos. Locks of hair from each son's first haircut. Some bicentennial quarters. His first driver's license. Under these items, Sam found a rubber-banded bundle of yellowed envelopes.

He held them for a long time as raindrops thrummed on the windows. The top letter had no name above the return address. Just a street number and a town in California. Alta Sierra. As he flipped through the letters, the street address changed a few times, but the city was always the same. He would ask Guaman what it meant. The last postmark read May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1995, much later than Dad had told him. Since the accident, Sam had half expected Mom to make contact. He'd been on the national news, as had the whole town. Surely she'd seen it. But the phone didn't ring. No other letters arrived.

The sound of the door snapped Sam from a daze, but he still held the letters when Jake walked in. He sorted through them just as Sam had. Each one had been carefully slit at the end, the way Dad always opened mail.

“Should we read them?” Jake said.

Sam had been close to pulling the first one out when Jake arrived, but doing it now, standing in Dad’s bedroom with Jake, felt amiss somehow.

“Not now.” He tucked them back in the drawer.

Later that week, he started making plans to leave. He’d played again at Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal, and it brought him close to happiness. He continued to tweak the slide mechanics and practiced every night. When he played, he thought of the faded return addresses on the envelopes. It all came back to California. Not the phone number or the producer. The place itself. If he got there and a different one-handed slide-guitarist already had the market cornered, he’d move on, but he had to try. He’d hungered for California when his music had nothing to say. Now he could speak with it. He couldn’t stay here, but he could take here with him.

And somewhere out there he’d find Alta Sierra.

He told Granma and Jake in early February and signed all of Dad’s documents over to them. He gave Jake half of the letters. “I’ll take the other half,” he said. “That way we’ll have a reason to call each other.”

Granma cried, but hugged him tight and told him to keep an eye out for the right girl. “Somebody who can cook,” she said. “You’re skin and bones.”



He told Guaman the next day, and Guaman surprised him by saying that he planned to move as well. “There’s nothing here now that the mine has closed. I’m no farmer.”

“Where are you going?”

“Colorado. My cousin works in a gold mine there. Much cleaner.”

A few days later, he watched Guaman and Pilar load their trailer and then crossed the road to see them off, playing peek-a-boo with Beatriz and helping Pilar fit the pictures behind the seat.

“Is this thing gonna get you to Colorado?” Sam said, smacking the hood of Guaman’s truck.

“It got me here from Utah. And the severance bought four very nice tires.” He kicked them with his boot as he chomped his cigar. Pilar didn’t seem to mind him smoking anymore.

“I want to thank you,” Sam said. “For everything.”

Guaman looked at him from behind the curling smoke. “I didn’t do much,” he said. “I gave you rides home. I made you a slide.” He raised an eyebrow. “A few things.”

“It was enough,” Sam said. He wanted to say more, but didn’t need to. They were knitted together by grief. “More than I deserved,” he said instead.

“Not true, chochera. I owe you, too. So if you find yourself near Cripple Creek, find me. I will make you a Pisco Sour that will curl your toes.”

“I’ll do that.” He’d never heard of a Pisco Sour.

Guaman’s truck pulled away, trailer in tow, as Sam watched from the couch in Dad’s living room. The lights were off, and when the sun went down, he sat in the dark.

The snow started late that night and ended the next evening. He slept in the small downstairs bedroom. No dirty laundry to trip over, no alarm clock to wake him. He picked his guitar as he watched the dim square of light wind its way across the wall.

He left the next morning with his possessions tucked under a camper shell he'd bought from an old man in Petersburg. Only the guitar rode up front, buckled into the passenger seat. Snow never lasted long in Pike County, and yesterday's accumulation already dripped from the power lines and fell in clumsy chunks from the trees. He glanced at Guaman's house as he pulled out, no longer decorated with Pilar's flowers or the large Peruvian flag. The porch swing still hung slightly crooked. Somewhere in the front yard lay the dented frying pan that found a second life as first base when Sam, Jake, and Danny had been boys. The sidewalk still held their handprints.

As the truck wound its way toward Oakland City and the new Interstate beyond, the fallow fields slipped into his rearview, sprinkled with melting snow. On his left, he passed the access road that led to the Friendship Mine. Its gate stood locked, with a large sign attached reading "No Public Access." Sam took a deep breath, and the gate swung forward in the wind, as if it breathed, too. He wanted to see Dad again. Julie. Danny. Jake believed he would, but Sam couldn't know. He would try to see Mom instead. It was a start. He dropped the truck into fourth gear as the sun rose behind him, painting the snowy treetops gold.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Chris Drew

Place of birth: Evansville, IN

Education

B.S., University of Evansville, 1999  
Major: Theatre

M.A., Oakland City University, 2000  
Major: Education

M.F.A., Oregon State University, 2007  
Major: Creative Writing

Dissertation Title: We Eat This Gold

Teaching Experience

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee: English Department Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2007–2013

Courses designed and taught:

- English 261: Introduction to Short Stories: American Short Stories, Spring 2013
- American Indian Studies 276/English 276: Introduction to American Indian Literature: The American Indian Novel, Fall 2012
- English 263: Introduction to the Novel: The Rural American Novel, Spring 2012
- English 234: Writing Fiction: Structure and Technique, Spring 2011
- English 233: Introduction to Creative Writing, Spring 2009–Spring 2010
- English 215: Introduction to English Studies, Fall 2010
- English 102: Research Writing, Spring 2009–Spring 2010
- English 101: College Writing, Fall 2007–Fall 2008 and Fall 2011

Cardinal Stritch University: College of Business and Management Adjunct Instructor, 2011–2014

Courses taught:

- ASB 282: Introduction to Literature: Fiction, 2013–2014
- ASB 240: Humanities I, 2012–2014
- ASB 245: Humanities II, 2012–2014
- ASB 101: Introduction to Written Communication, 2011–2012
- MGT 301: Critical Thinking and Writing, Spring 2012–2012

Other positions:

- Writing Across the Curriculum Program: Writing Coach, 2013–2014

DeVry University: Visiting Professor, 2010–2014

Courses taught:

- English 147N: Advanced English Composition, 2013–2014 (online course)

- English 135: Advanced Composition, 2010–2014 (online course)
- Oakland City University: Education Department Adjunct Instructor, 2008–2009
- Courses taught:
- Education 510: Psychology of Teaching, 2008–2009
  - Education 575: Reading Problems in the Content Area, 2008–2009
- Oregon State University: English Department Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2005–2007
- Courses designed and taught:
- Writing 121: English Composition, 2005–2007
  - Writing 224: Introduction to Fiction Writing, 2006–2007
- Mater Dei High School, Evansville, Indiana: English and Theatre Arts Teacher, 2002–2005
- Heritage Hills Middle School, Lincoln City, Indiana: Language Arts Teacher, 2000–2002

### Publications

#### Academic Books and Articles:

- *Dispatches from the Classroom: Graduate Students on Creative Writing Pedagogy* (co-edited with David Yost and Joseph Rein), Continuum Books, December 2011
- “Composing Creatively: Further Crossing the Composition/Creative Writing Boundaries” (with David Yost) *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 42.1, Spring 2009

#### Fiction:

- “Achilles’ Last Stand” *Wild Violet*, Fall 2013
- “Miller’s Field” *Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley* 9.1, Fall 2009
- “Chromosome Four” *The Bellevue Literary Review* 8.2, Fall 2008  
Reprinted in *The UWM Anthology*, forthcoming
- “The Challenged” *The Evansville Review* 9, 1999

#### Creative Nonfiction:

- “Four by Eight” *Quarterly West* 78, Spring 2013
- “Detour” *The Literary Circular* 2, Spring 2009
- “Marking Time” *Red Wheelbarrow* 9, 2008
- “Bringing Up the Markers” *Concho River Review* 22.1, Spring 2008
- “Sustenance” *The Sycamore Review* 20.2, Summer/Fall 2008

### Conference Presentations

- “Dealing at the Crossroads: Creative Writing in the Composition Classroom” *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, St. Louis, Missouri, March 2012
- “Sound and Voice in the Creative Writing Classroom: Practice-Based Pedagogies” (Session Chair) *Modern Language Association Conference*, Seattle, Washington, January 2012
- “Composing Creatively: Further Crossing the Composition/Creative Writing

Boundaries” *Midwest Modern Language Association Conference*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 2008

- “Essays and Stories: The Composition/Creative Writing Connection” *Those Who Can, Teach: First-Year Composition Conference*, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December 2007

#### Fellowships, Honors, and Awards

- Ellen Hunnicut Prize in Creative Writing, for *We Eat This Gold* (excerpt), University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2013
- AWP Intro Journals Project Award Winner in Nonfiction, for “Four by Eight,” 2012
- Golda Meir Library Scholar Award Finalist, 2012–2013
- Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2011–2013
- Ellen Hunnicut Prize in Creative Writing, for “The Rough Side,” University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2011
- Graduate School Fellowship, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2010–2011
- Sheila Roberts Memorial Award in Creative Writing, for “Miller’s Field,” University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2010
- Bontly-Hunnicut Fiction Award first runner-up, for “Chromosome Four,” University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2009
- Chancellor’s Graduate Student Award, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2007–2008
- Phi Kappa Phi Induction, Oregon State University, Spring 2007
- President’s Award, Harlaxton College, Grantham, England, Spring 1998

#### Service and Profession Activity

##### University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

- *cream city review* Creative Nonfiction Editor, 2010–2012
- Campus Connect Suicide Gatekeeper Training Program, 2011
- *cream city review* Assistant Editor, 2009–2010
- Creative Writing Student Coalition Officer, 2008–2010
- Fundraiser Participant, UWM Panther Prowl, 2007–2009

##### Oregon State University

- Graduate Policy Committee Member, 2007
- ROTC Blackhawk Flight Faculty Representative, 2007
- Writing Consultant, Oregon State Center for Writing and Learning, 2005