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Bad City

By

Matt Mayr

The world is dark. Its unrelenting harmony  
includes as well as hymns the cries  
of human atoms in an endless dark where things,  
both good and evil, rise and fall.

Victor Hugo, *The Graveyard at Villequier*

*It came in broad strokes, a great swath of murky cruelty lapping the shores, dissolving them like cubes of sugar. From a hill in the good neighbourhood, Simon watched as the city disappeared below him, and he knew that nothing would ever be the same. He remembered Anthony's father had a gun, but he knew that would not matter. Simon had learned enough of bad men to know one rifle wasn't enough to stop what was coming. When the good neighbourhood became an island, the men came from the city's core. Like the water, they came for what they were owed.*

## Prologue – Agents of Nature

Frank Baxter was unmistakable. Six foot five and lean, broad shoulders, angular features, and crystal blue eyes that surveyed the street like a vulture. With long, calculated strides, a man in slow motion, confident the world can wait, he walked down the west-end street sidestepping a gutted Honda, its rusted frame stripped of anything remotely useful.

Travis Parker wasn't as confident. They were only two, and they were out of their element, a long way from the city across the river. But Frank had convinced him: this was their chance. A void needed filling and who better than the two of them. Travis was a foot shorter than Frank and gaunt, his youthful metabolism a liability when food was scarce. As long as Travis could remember, he figured his size could be interpreted as weakness, and he compensated with a viciousness few could match, or that they expected. He touched the cold steel of the forty-five tucked in his waistband and felt bigger, stronger. He kept pace behind Frank, watching the deep corners.

Nobody was on the street, but Travis knew the people were there, watching from behind their boarded-up windows and pock-marked doorways. They passed a bisected oil barrel turned on its side and charred black, still radiating heat. It was dusk and the bright moon was rising at their backs. No candles would be needed tonight.

Marciello's bungalow was at the end of the cul-de-sac. The porch was dark, but Travis made out a faint silhouette to the left of the door. Travis slowed when he saw Marciello there, and looked over his shoulder, the thought of an ambush darting through his mind. He gripped the handle of his gun and stared into the stillness of the street, looking and listening for movement, but there was none. His heart pounded against his ribs. They were in the open and could be taken out. Frank took too many chances.

Frank stopped at the threshold of the driveway, their long shadows obvious in the low moonlight. Travis thought they might as well be glowing.

“Marciello,” Frank said.

Marciello coughed, but didn’t speak. “Marciello,” Frank said again, “you know why we’re here.”

Marciello struck a match, loud in the night air. He raised it to his dark, bearded complexion, and lit a small cigar. This was the face Travis remembered from that night one month ago, the face of the man who had taken them in when they were tired and famished, with barely a question asked. Marciello had fed them and given them shelter. He had been their saviour, and now they were here to kill him. Travis cocked the hammer of his gun; the click echoed down the street. Then, Marciello spoke. “I knew it was only a matter of time before men like you showed up.”

Frank smiled. “Men like what?”

“Men like you,” Marciello answered in a Spanish accent. “I know who you are.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do,” Marciello said firmly. He had made up his mind then, and there would be no changing it no matter what Frank said.

Frank’s smile faded. He’d told Travis how Marciello would react, and he’d been right. It was one of the things about Frank that Travis could never fully grasp—his ability to read people, to manipulate them. Marciello was doing exactly what Frank wanted, oblivious to the fact that he was doing so. Travis kept watch, but he knew now that there would be no other men, there would only be Marciello; he was too proud.

“So tell me, what kind of men are we?”

Marciello took a puff on his cigar. “I don’t need to tell you that. You already know, don’t you?”

“Maybe,” Frank said. “But could be your interpretation is all wrong. Setting is everything, after all.”

A cold breeze came up and Travis buried his chin. He had never killed anyone before because Frank had always done the killing. Now Frank said it was Travis’s turn, said it was an important part of his growth. And because Frank had taken them this far—across the river and still alive—and promised to take them even farther, Travis would obey.

“Whatever we are to you is beside the point. We’re here to make you an offer,” Frank said.

“An offer?” Marciello laughed. He rose from the wicker chair that Travis couldn’t see but knew was there. “There’s nothing you could give me Frank, and I have nothing for you. You can’t stay in this town any longer.”

“But just think of how far we could go together, you and me. With your industriousness, and my way with people.”

“No, Frank.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear you say that.” Frank looked at Travis. It was a look Travis knew well, something Frank did with his eyes whenever they were in the midst of a job, a flash of playfulness. They were at the point of no return, and the knot in Travis’s stomach began to untie. Like every job he did with Frank, he felt better once it was underway. It was the anticipation that killed him. He didn’t mind the idea of killing, that was just a mechanical action, and at the moment when the thing needed to be done, he would become a machine, no longer a person. Travis had seen enough death to rationalize what he was about to do. He had seen enough people

killed by Frank to know how to do it right. It was Travis's turn to pull the trigger. Them or us, Frank always said.

Marciello stepped out of the shadow of the overhanging porch and onto the top step. He stood in the moonlight, the thin cigar hanging from his mouth, glowing like smoldering coal. A shotgun poked out from under a coarse burgundy afghan, aimed at Frank's chest. "Now you have to go."

"Well, that's the problem. We like it here. When you see what else is out there, what you've done is remarkable. You have no idea of the potential, of what we could do together." Frank took a step forward, palms outstretched. "I'm unarmed."

"Sorry Frank, I was never too ambitious. We have enough to take care of ourselves, don't need any more. And we don't need you, so go on."

"What will you do when someone tries to take it from you? Will you defend it? Where are your soldiers? I see only you and that twelve-gauge. What if bad people come, what will you do then?"

"I'll turn them away, same as you."

"A powerful man needs soldiers," Frank said. "Last chance."

Marciello raised the shotgun to his chin, fixed his eye behind the bead.

"Very well," Frank said. He turned. Travis squeezed the butt of his forty-five, the metal now warm in his hand. Stubborn Marciello, he thought. Too stuck in his ways to see the new reality, the one that was banging down his door right now, the one that was coming like a storm cloud, like darkness. The rules were different, and Marciello was an extinct creature, he just didn't know it yet.

Marciello lowered his shotgun, figuring the confrontation was over. As Travis watched him, he realized what Frank was telling him all along—that Marciello was too weak to even defend what was his. He was letting his guard down already. He didn't have the stomach to run this place. Travis despised him and everything he'd accomplished on borrowed time, but suppressed his anger, forcing emotion from his mind. Travis's pulse was even now, and to his surprise he felt invigorated by the moment. They were righting a wrong. They were agents of nature, men who would not tolerate weakness.

Frank's eyes bored into him; do it now, they said. Travis made as if to leave, taking a step back. He waited until Marciello's back was turned, afghan swaying like stiff canvas, no give. Thin wisps of cigar smoke rose above the roof of the porch, illuminated by the perfect moon.

Travis brought the gun level in an action he'd made a thousand times before. This time it was different, but not that different. Marciello was just a target, and Travis was a marksman. All powerful animals are ruthless.

Travis blinked slowly and exhaled.

Then he was a machine.



## 1. Harry's Wares

*Fifteen years later.*

"Bottom," said Simon Gray. "One from the bottom."

The old man bent near double to reach the apples at the bottom of the pushcart. He rummaged through the beaten-up produce selecting, then carefully discarding, until he picked one that wasn't too bad and reached up to Simon's outstretched hand. He winced as if in pain, but Simon knew the old man's tricks. Simon paid with an uneven silver coin with rough edges and thickness twice that of a quarter. The old man eyed the coin suspiciously, then dropped it in the pocket of his tattered wool cardigan. He brushed off his knees with the palms of his hands and continued down an asphalt road covered in a fine layer of taupe dust that lifted with the slightest breeze and sifted into any gap in clothing, any crevice.

Simon took a bite of the apple. It was better than anything he'd tasted in a long time. His stomach grumbled as the soft, white flesh slid down his throat. He hadn't eaten a decent meal in a couple of days, and felt the nourishment in his body almost instantly. He walked between the worn buildings, feeling the metal in the pocket of his blue jeans. He only had a few coins left, maybe enough to last until the end of the week, which was why he was going to see Harry. In the old days, he could have pick-pocketed anyone on the street, but not these days. Money was kept close, prized. It was easier to do on contract what he did best and get paid for it. But that was before his conscience had gotten to him.

It was early morning and there were few people out. The vendors were just beginning to set up in the tunnel—a stretch of thin roadway about one hundred metres long where the buildings reached straight up for a few storeys. In about an hour the pushcarts and wooden tables would line both sides of the street, offering food for sale. The vendors reminded Simon of his

own parents, who had grown vegetables and sold them at the Kochi market. Sometimes the similarities to the past were as striking to Simon as the differences.

The road curved left and came to an abrupt opening at a small plaza. Simon's tall frame and blond good looks stood out in the gloomy street. He was thirty-two, and there was something about his still-youthful, clean-shaven face and kind eyes that people trusted. And when he began to speak in the confident, diplomatic voice he had cultivated over the years, they liked him even more. Simon had mastered the nuances of expression and tone just as he had the mechanics of the art itself.

A good thief is like a best friend who one day simply disappears.

On the east side of the road was a massive gothic cathedral with a huge stone façade and tower that almost pierced the morning cloud cover. The church was centuries old, yet in better repair than every building around it and most other buildings on the whole west side of the river.

A lineup had begun to form on the steps leading to the cathedral's façade. Simon looked at the people, in their tattered rags, unkempt hair and hopelessness, and the signs of sickness that marked them: the malnutrition common among the poorest, and the impetigo that was beginning to spread through the community. Those already carrying the bacteria were considered untouchable, and the spread was slowed by segregation, the worst affected forced to stay indoors except to procure food at the cathedral first thing in the morning. Whole families were now on the steps. Simon often wondered what would happen if suddenly the priests locked the doors to them. The cathedral was their lifeline, and Simon felt for the fathers who were unable to provide for their families, forced to live on the handouts of the priests.

He walked down a narrow alleyway to the side of the cathedral. The entrance was different than he remembered it from a few days ago, now it had a newer steel door retrofitted with thick iron bars running horizontally into the old stone of the cathedral. The bolts disappeared into the door frame and there were no locks or keyholes; the door would only open from the inside. There was a small black button dead center, and above that a peephole. Simon wondered where Harry got the good metal for this upgrade. He pressed the buzzer, then touched his ribs where his handgun usually sat in its leather holster, feeling vulnerable without it.

Simon couldn't hear any sounds coming from inside the cathedral. During the daily masses, the booming reverberations of the congregation were audible, but the footsteps of a man were lost behind the thick stone. Simon looked into the peephole, and suddenly the bolts slid open.

Harry's Hawaiian shirt was open to the third button, revealing his thick chest and the gold chain around his neck, as he thrust out a fleshy hand and grabbed Simon's arm.

"What's this?" Simon asked, nodding at the door. "Not planning on getting out, ever?"

"What the hell for?" Harry grumbled, ushering him into the dark entryway and slamming the door shut. He slid the bolt across sharply, the noise echoing off the walls and deep into the bowels of the cathedral.

"Looks like some good work, welded even. Where did you get the steel?"

"Baxter." Harry led the way down a narrow passage lit by broad, stubby candles set into notches in the stone. He spoke over his shoulder. "Scouted a job for him awhile back in the north. Fisher."

"So it's true, then."

"But you didn't hear that from me."

“I never do.”

He moved a few mechanical-looking items off a crowded oak dining chair, and Simon sat down.

“Coffee?” he asked. Simon nodded.

The room was cavernous. At one point it had been part of the side chapel, until Harry had leased it from the priests and blocked it off from the north transept with a brick wall. Two windows high up on the north wall let in a small amount of light. The room was always damp, and Harry had a fire going, a stack of split wood beside the iron stove.

Harry poured coffee from an aluminum percolator. “Perfect timing,” he said, his brow permanently furrowed from years of anxiety. “Do you know how long it’s taken me to get the flavour just right? It’s not easy with these old pots.”

“This is the only place I can get coffee, Harry. That’s the only reason I keep coming back to this dungeon.”

Harry smiled. “Too strong and it tastes like piss. Too weak, it tastes like shit. It’s a goddamn tightrope.”

The combination of smells in the room reminded Simon of the long winters at the cabin with his parents, who also heated their coffee in an aluminum pot on a wood stove. Their home wasn’t much different, either, in its simplicity.

“Not easy to get anymore, not at all. But I’d pay an arm for it,” Harry said. “So, what do you need?”

“I’m broke Harry. I need work.”

Harry nodded solemnly. “I see, come to me when you need me eh?”

“You know how I feel about it.”

“One shouldn’t deny their natural God-given gifts. But I’ve got work for you, plenty of it. All you need to do is ask.”

“I’m asking now.”

“You look like you need a good meal.”

“It’s not that bad. I’ve got a few coins left, but I’m about near the end.” Simon shook his head. “How do you do it, Harry? Manage jobs for Frank. You’re a good man. I’ve known you long enough to know that.”

Harry shrugged. “What do you want me to say? I disassociate, like everybody else. You used to be able to do that.”

“Maybe I don’t have the stomach for it anymore.”

“I hope that’s not true. I just had a new job thrown my way a few days ago. I knew you’d be due, so I held it for you.”

Fact was, Simon knew, nobody else in Harry’s circle had Simon’s skill set. The job would have been Simon’s one way or another. “You’re a gentleman,” Simon said. “What’s the job?”

“North Town. That’s where it’s at these days. Baxter must be up to something big. Reconnaissance mainly, right now, but I’m sure it will lead to a follow up. That’s why I want you. It’s not the type of job you’re used to, but I have a feeling. Go now, and you’ll already know the terrain by heart. You’ll have walked it. Why send someone else just so they can forward the information to you? Too much gets lost in the translation, it always does. No, you’ll go.”

The north was intriguing to Simon, and in ways that had nothing to do with Baxter or even Harry. “When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Pay?”

“Same as last time. When the job is done, like always. So, you want it?”

“I need it.”

“Good. I was beginning to think I was going to have to chase you down for this one. You’re my best guy, Simon. I couldn’t give it to anyone else, no way. Nobody else has your creativity, your presence of mind.”

“Stop it, Harry, you’ll make me blush.”

“It’s true. And with all the activity coming from Frank, there’s going to be more. But the next job will pay better, if I’m right about this. And then you can disappear again, until you need me.” The porcelain coffee mug met Harry’s grizzled face, and the drink seemed to relax him a bit.

“You aren’t wrong often, my friend. Just look around you.” Simon gestured at the vast cathedral room, which contained more comforts and luxuries than anyone else he knew.

“Means nothing,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“The hell it doesn’t.” A noise was coming from the church on the other side of the brick wall. People were filing in now in the orderly, masochistic way the priests demanded. “And your rate?” Simon asked.

“Up again. Goddamn priests have no heart.”

“They know how well you do. Still the best location in town. And if you ever gave it up—”

“Not likely,” Harry grumbled. “I said they rip me off, I didn’t say I was a fool.” He was getting irritable, his usual sneer beginning to form, the muscles on his neck tensing up.

“One more thing,” Simon said.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Send a runner to your guard at the wall. Tell him I’m coming through tomorrow. Noon. I’d do it myself, but its short notice. You can take it out of my pay.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

Simon nodded. “Rounds,” he said. “I’m out of ammunition.”

The tunnel was busy with people pressed shoulder to shoulder, squeezed into the bottleneck of a road. Simon needed food for his excursion to North Town, something that would keep. At the far end were the meat vendors, and he looked for a certain type, someone young and inexperienced.

He found his mark at a table with strips of dried game tied into small bundles. The vendor, maybe twenty, looked well built under his black pea coat, and no doubt had a gun in his pocket—Simon looked for the telltale hard edge under the black wool. The vendor, however, lacked attention to detail. In the time Simon waited, he watched him drop a customer’s change, and look away while another made his selection. Simon moved ahead in the line as seamlessly as possible, while he shifted all his money, parceled in pieces of cotton to keep them quiet, into his left pocket, leaving his right pocket empty except for one half-coin. In his hand, he held another coin.

When he reached the front of the line, he pointed out two bundles. The price was four for a coin, two for a half-coin. He fumbled in his pockets. “I know I’ve got a half in here somewhere, just give me a second.”

The vendor frowned impatiently.

“Damn,” Simon said. “Must’ve spent it last night. Can you change a coin?”

Like most vendors in the tunnel, his cash box was on a ledge under the table. He put the coin on the table while he searched for change, and in one swift motion, Simon picked up his two bundles, slipped the coin back into his pocket, and presented the half-coin.

“Here we are,” he said, handing it to the vendor. “Can I get my coin back now?”

The vendor took the half coin, dropping it in the cash box and handed another coin back. Simon took it, and walked easily away, the vendor already dealing with the next person in line.



## 2. River Road

Stealing from a vendor was almost as bad as doing a job for Frank Baxter. Almost, but not quite. It didn't help that Simon's own parents had been poor farmers and vendors, and that every time he stole from the people in South Town, he felt his parents watching him disapprovingly. But this was the irony. The one thing he excelled at, and allowed him to survive, was the one thing he could no longer do without feeling guilt and regret. But he had to eat, and if that meant stealing, or doing a job for Frank, then that's what it meant.

The road through the outskirts joining South Town to North Town hugged the muddy river, wide and full, its clay banks nearly covered by water. It used to run that high only in spring, but this was the brink of winter, which was supposed to be dry season.

East of the river was the city where the old skyscrapers stood like stalagmites. They were succumbing to erosion and time, though, green and gray-coloured, with windows missing and broken, their glass shards scattered on the ground and pliable as plastic from summers under hot sun.

The city was deserted now, but after the fall there'd been gangs, men like packs of wild dogs. Simon had been there at its worst, before he'd fled with others to the west. The skyscrapers reminded him of his time there, when the city erupted within weeks. And like others, he had defended the riverbed that he walked beside now, waiting in ambush for crossing gangs. He was just a boy then, but he'd fought for Frank Baxter, the man they'd called the Carpenter.

There was a time when Simon had only wanted to go north to his parents' cabin, where he'd left them at the end. Sometimes he imagined they might still be there, but he knew that wasn't possible, that they were dead. He had thought about returning to grow food and hunt, to survive, an idea that drifted further away with each passing day, each new job. But this job

would take him to North Town, beyond the borders of his own community, and he could have a look at least, scope the possibilities out.

The mark was a Fisher man, a courier. Fisher had found something interesting in one of the outlying defunct communities that dotted the outskirts like flecks of lost pollen. Scavengers searched there for the useful, but those places were best avoided, as they were strewn with dangerous individuals—loners. This was what Simon watched for now: a lone man accustomed only to himself and perpetual quiet, a practiced sneak, coming out of the forest and sticking a knife into his back.

It was a twenty kilometer walk along River Road to reach the North Town gate, and Simon walked briskly but deliberately, blending into the landscape as if he belonged. Whether in a crowded market or on an abandoned highway, the goal was the same: leave no telltale sign of his identity. It was the first rule of the pickpocket thief, and he learned it early on.

The ground was damp, and smelled of rotting leaves. Between gusts of cold wind off the river, Simon heard sparrows in the tree line. He carried only one small bag of basic provisions and had only the clothes on his back. He zipped his bomber jacket to his chin and pulled his wool hat over his ears.

The single-lane highway was like a fault line. Years of temperature change and no maintenance had caused it to fall quickly into disrepair. Grass grew high on the shoulders and from cracks in the pavement. Soon there'd be no sign there was ever a road here.

### 3. The Wall

Skinned poplar trees, tall, straight, and fashioned into points jutting out of the ground and reached into the sky, obscuring the community beyond. From a high point on the road, Simon could see the gate through his binoculars, and the two sentries sitting on a log, eating a lunch of something steaming hot. Smoke from their small, smoldering fire floated above them like a halo. There was a slight dusting of snow on the ground, the first Simon had seen this year. Further to the east was the river, and beyond that, barely visible, the edge of the city, a cookie-cut row of deserted suburban homes like broken teeth.

A guard from the Fisher camp was supposed to let Simon through the gate, but the view through Simon's binoculars told him the guard was late. A few trees, blown over in a storm formed a dome of branches and twigs, a makeshift hut into which Simon insinuated himself, camouflaging the view from the road with thick green branches.

The biting wind found its way through the mesh of branches, and he watched the sentries huddled around their fire with envy. He studied the wall, looking for low spots or any place where the trees came close enough for him to jump from overhanging limbs. But it was a good twenty-five feet high, and even if he did manage to scale it, he'd still have to wait until the cover of darkness. He looked at his watch, shivering, considering his options, when Harry's guard walked through the gate.

He talked briefly with the two other sentries before they left, and then gathered sticks for the fire before he looked to the hillside where the road climbed the hill like an asphalt ribbon. Simon waited for five more freezing minutes to be sure no one was coming up the road before he emerged from his debris pile and made his way to the gate.

“Noon. I said noon.” Simon dropped his bag and rubbed his hands together over the fire.

“It’s one o’ clock.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the guard said. He had a round face set squarely atop a stocky body, hiding any evidence of a neck. “Where the hell were you, anyway? Couldn’t see a thing.”

“Hiding. Freezing my balls off.”

The guard adjusted his checked hunting cap. “I couldn’t rush. Can’t let these guys think there’s something funny goin’ on with me. Do you know what would happen if Fisher found out?”

“I have an idea.”

The guard motioned his thumb around his throat from ear to ear.

“So why take the risk?”

“Because you pay well. Got a smoke?”

Simon pulled an old candy tin from his jacket pocket. It was dented and the paint was mostly worn away. He’d found it years ago on one of his scavenging trips through the outskirts. Sometimes he still sniffed it, hoping for that sweet lemon scent that used to be there, but it was long gone. He handed a smoke to the guard and took one for himself. “Much traffic?”

“Nah. Winter’s slowed everything down. Nobody wants to go too far, you know how it is. Anyway, Fisher keeps this gate locked tight. But that doesn’t stop you, does it?”

“Not when I’ve got you.”

The guard lit his smoke from a small log on the fire and passed the burning ember to Simon. “Actually, there’s been a group out for over a week now, through the gate on the river side. They been in the city, so I heard. Since then, we’re on lockdown. Nobody in or out unless

Fisher himself gives the okay. So you understand I'm taking a big risk here. I haven't heard of anyone goin' over there for years. You ever heard of anyone crossing the river?"

"Not for years," Simon said.

Fisher's men were in the city. As far as Simon knew, this was a first. Simon hadn't been there since the fall. The river had crested the banks, putting the city under water, but the buildings still burned from electrical fires and fires set by criminals, back when such distinctions between people could be made. Simon had waded through the septic streets, his face an inch above the brown water, smoke above him, bodies around him, and he'd thought there was no worse place in the world to die. He had wanted to head north, back to the cabin, but it was too far and too difficult. The only direction to go was west, away from the chaos, and he'd headed for the deep water in the core of the city, leaving his parents behind.

Whatever Fisher was doing across the river now, Simon thought, must have something to do with why he was also here. The coincidence was too great. Harry hadn't given him any details, which meant he didn't have any to give. All Simon knew was that there was a meeting about the mark, the courier.

"Something big is going down." The guard looked at Simon. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Nothing."

"Figures." He puffed on his smoke. "You know, we don't get anything like this behind the wall. Ours taste like shit."

Simon took the tin from his pocket and handed it to the guard. "These are for you. More when I return. Smoke them. Trade them. Whatever you want."

The guard smiled. “You know what I can get for these over the wall? Always a pleasure doing business with you.”

He untied a faded yellow rope and the heavy log that blocked the gap in the wall slowly rose until a bag of rocks that acted as the counter-weight touched the ground. Simon took a final drag on his cigarette before grinding it under his heel. He nodded at the guard, and walked through the gate into North Town.

#### 4. The Woman in the Market

He saw her in the North Town market, long brown cotton skirt and red sweater, brown hair loose on her shoulders. A frayed black nylon bag hung from the bend of her elbow, and despite the chill, she wore sandals on her feet. She was scanning the produce for good pieces, delicate hands lifting and turning the fruit. He watched her for a moment, fascinated by her subtlety, the way her energy offset the endless gray of the near-winter day.

She selected three tomatoes and approached the vendor, an older man with gray hair and thin arms who was watching her carefully, because she was alone. In the towns, it wasn't common for a young woman to be out by herself, even during the day. There were husbands or fathers to accompany them, unless they worked in the seedy end of town, and then they'd only be out at night. This was the nature of a town run by gangsters and policed by thugs, where men's worst instincts could surface like oil on water at the mere sight of a beautiful woman, where the nastiest urges weren't only not suppressed, but encouraged, cultivated. All part of the program that kept the people in line.

But she was alone, and she was confident. She was beautiful too, in a rare and extraordinary way, a ray of light in town's darkness, and Simon wanted to talk to her. But as he considered approaching, he realized how long it had been since he'd spoken to a woman he didn't know, and had no idea what to say. He'd been unattached for all of his life in South Town, and was unaccustomed to the feelings that were now radiating through him, making him anxious and hesitant. He watched her from a distance, waiting for the right moment.

She placed the tomatoes on the table in front of the vendor who glared at her, unflinching, looking offended by her presence. It was clear he thought she might be a thief or some kind of degenerate, else why would she be alone. She took out a half coin and laid it on the table, and

when the man still made no effort to talk to her, she put the tomatoes in her bag, and began to walk away. The man reached out with the quickness of a snake, and grabbed her by the wrist.

“What are you doing?” she yelled. “Let go of me.”

“You’re stealing from me. Price is three for one.”

“They’re three for a half. I put a half on the table. Now let go of my arm.”

“Price is three for one. Put down another half or put ‘em back.”

“The price is always three for a half; I just saw you sell them to someone else.”

“Price is what I say it is,” he said. “Now pay up, or get out of here.”

She placed the tomatoes on the counter. “I’m not paying that; I’ll go to the next vendor.”

“Suit yourself.” He let go of her arm, and looked away like she wasn’t there.

She began to leave, but couldn’t help herself and turned around to confront him. “What’s your problem, anyway?”

He leaned across the table. “My problem is that you got no business being here alone. Who do you think you are? Women like you cause nothing but trouble. Fisher’s men see you here alone, what do you think they’ll do? Come to the market with your husband, next time.” He turned his head to spit in the dirt beside his table. “Or are you a whore, that it? Bit too early for you ain’t it? No, you’re no whore, too proud. You’re a thief trying to steal from me. Don’t come back here again.”

“You’re disgusting,” she said.

The man glared at her from behind the table, eyes burning. “You better watch your mouth.”

And that’s when Simon walked across the street and stood beside her, whispered in her ear, “Don’t leave.”



She was startled at first, flinching from his closeness, but when she turned their eyes met and she relaxed a bit, and he knew she wasn't going to leave.

"The price is three for a half," Simon said to the vendor. "Now give them back, and tell her you're sorry."

The man's eyes narrowed. "She with you?"

"Yes she's with me," Simon said.

"I thought she was stealing."

"You didn't see her take anything."

"Doesn't matter. She's got no business being here like that, attracts all kinds of trouble."

"How about you apologize."

The man scoffed, "You must be joking. This is my table. Take her and get out of here."

Simon turned his back to the woman, and opened his jacket so that the old man could see the butt of his forty-five sticking out of its leather holster. "You don't want trouble? How about you apologize."

The old man stared at the gun, his anger mounting from being put in his place and knowing there was nothing he could do about. He looked at the woman, couldn't even meet her eyes, and muttered a barely audible apology. She put the goods in her bag, and said nothing.

"If you see her again," Simon said. "Remember that she's with me, think about that when you talk to her. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The old man nodded grudgingly, eyes fixed on his table, and the woman and Simon walked away. When they were a good distance away, she turned to him. "Thank you," she said. "That guy is a real jerk."

“But he’s right,” Simon said. “About you being alone, I mean. Not about anything else. It isn’t safe for you.”

She looked at him, and he was struck by her radiance, her soft, delicate features, green eyes wide and intense, piercing. “But I need to eat,” she said.

“Don’t you have anyone who can take you to the market?”

“A friend, sometimes, but today he couldn’t.”

“You shouldn’t go to the market alone. Most men here aren’t like me. They see a pretty woman like you, and—”

“I know how it is here. You don’t have to tell me that. I’ve lived here for a very long time, always on my own,” she said, and her eyes seemed to look right through him, easily piercing his façade, as though she was gazing into his depths, judging him that very moment. She was younger than him, but he sensed she had wisdom and self-possession about her that was uncommon, and he admired her conviction.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you that. I don’t even know you.”

“So how do I get to know you?”

He saw her smile for the first time, cheeks turning a light shade of pink. “Is that what this is?”

“You don’t think I told that guy off for nothing, do you?”

She laughed, eyes turning skyward, and her hair fell off her shoulders to reveal her slight, pale neck. “So you want something for your kindness, is that it?”

“Just to know your name.”

“I may have a good feeling about you, but this is still North Town. Maybe we’ll run into each other again.”

“That might be hard, because I don’t live here.”

She touched his arm. “Then I guess we’ll see. Some things are meant to be and others aren’t. But thank you, no one’s ever helped me like that before. It’s good to know good people still exist.”

She turned and walked away, cutting a straight path through the maze of market stalls, all confidence and beauty. And as Simon watched her go, he felt an attraction that he’d never felt before, and he knew right then that he had to know her.

## 5. The Informant

North Town was like South Town in most ways, so many that Simon had to wonder what went on between Baxter and Fisher behind closed doors. Both towns had a market and greenhouses. Both towns had a single, autocratic leader who controlled men, who in turn policed the community, leveraging power and ruling with fear and brutality. The only real difference was that South Town was bigger, had more mouths to feed, and came first. North Town sprouted up a few years later, when Fisher and some others came from the city and were turned away by Frank Baxter who, sensing a rival, inadvertently created a true adversary. The communities were supposed to be at war, but no real advances had been made as long as Simon could remember, which, in fact, was as long as the communities had existed. To Simon, the war seemed to be one of convenience, something to keep the people afraid and thankful of their violent protectors. There were rumours to this effect, but Simon didn't know for sure. Both communities were made up of survivors from the city, so it wasn't surprising that the type of men who were most prevalent resembled each other, and that families and young women kept themselves inconspicuous and never went out after dark when the glow and noise of the saloons dominated the rough moonlit roads. Simon saw the two men as mirror images of each other, twins separated at birth, living out their nightmarish fantasies like bad children left alone for too long, torturing cats and burning the house down.

Simon had been in the bar about a year before, and it hadn't changed, could have even had the same customers, as if the crude alcohol could somehow stop time. Colours in every room, furniture, walls, and people, were reduced to browns and blacks and various shades of grey, but if the energy of the place could be described by a single colour, it was black: drunkenness, rage, predacious instinct.

Simon flipped up the hood on his sweatshirt as he walked through the bar, trying to take on the rhythms of the place. He checked every room for a red hat, which the contact said he'd be wearing. Seeing none, he went to the nearest counter and got a drink.

The bartender was an old fellow, stringy and myopic. His glasses were scratched and stained, and he thrust his head back when Simon approached, as if he was looking through a long tube and could only see Simon from a distance. The drink was already in his hand, a small glass of colourless liquid distilled from potatoes. It smelled poisonous. He held it until Simon laid a half-coin on the folding table between them.

"You from here?" the bartender asked.

Simon took the glass but said nothing. The bartender smiled. "I thought so." He gestured around the room. "These guys don't like outsiders. Me, I don't care one way or another. From South Town?"

Simon looked at the old bartender, but again said nothing.

"The last feller from South Town, they cut his balls off and hung em' over the doorway. Feller didn't even do anything but look at someone the wrong way." He laughed, and leaned in close. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Simon downed the drink, and the bartender quickly refilled his glass. Simon produced a half-coin, but the bartender pushed his hand away. "On the house," he said. "So are you going to tell me what you're doing here? Sit there long enough without saying nothin' and one of them guys might take notice, might come over here and make trouble."

"North," Simon answered. "Do you know anything about the north?"

"Not really, nothing you probably don't already know. You came from South Town, did you, walked the river? I guess the north is like that, but worse, probably. It's our north gate

Fisher protects most. Double the guards at that post. He's not afraid of you, you men from South Town, I mean. But these loners are unpredictable." He spat onto the grey floorboards by his feet. "So you want to know about the north. Let me guess." He leaned back with his head tilted, trying to get a satisfactory look at Simon. "Looking for a better world, a place where men are free and good? Not good enough here, not free enough? Take a long look around you, this is as good as it gets."

"Is that what you think?"

He brought his face close to Simon's. "You're goddamn right that's what I think. I was there before. And you're not so young, you remember too. What was the world before Fisher and Baxter? Do you remember that?"

"I do." Simon looked around the bar at the men with their loud, drunk frontier faces, sneering and stubbled. Guns were holstered or stuck in pants; knives glinted like coins in sunlight. "But I look around here and I see the same faces I remember from before, except now they've been corralled into saloons and leaky apartments because they're told to. But they still kill, don't they?"

"Yes they do. But don't we all? Don't kid yourself. Anyone who's made it has earned his survival. These men kill to survive, just like me and you."

"At one time, maybe. But not anymore," Simon said. Still, he knew the bartender had a point. Everyone at one time had been ruthless, needed to be to stay alive. It was a commonality that everyone shared, to know the person beside you had blood on his hands, the most intimate of connections. Could be Simon just hid his bad deeds a little better than most. Maybe he was the same as them, but with a nice coat of white paint, or maybe he was worse, someone who believed his own lies.

He remembered the woman in the market, and what she had said to him. She'd told him that it was nice to know that good people still existed, that she could tell he was one of the good ones. He hoped that she was right.

"If you say so," the bartender said. "But you asked about the north. I've heard that the roads in that direction are barren, not even the loners will venture farther than where the river turns east. I don't know anyone who goes that way, or anyone who wants to. It's too dangerous if you ask me. But you're not really here to talk about the north, are you? No, you're here about a red hat."

Simon nodded.

The bartender pulled a red wool hat from under the table, laying it on the bar between them. "So let's talk then young fella."

The bartender poured them two drinks, cider this time. They were in a room in the back of the saloon, just the two of them. Simon could hear the steady thump of a bed frame colliding with the wall of the next room, and the faint moans of a woman. With each thump, plaster crumbled between the walls.

"It's some sort of device, that's all I know," the old man said. He sat on a rickety wooden chair in front of a scarred table.

"What do you mean, device?" Simon asked.

"I don't know. Computers."

"None of that stuff ever works."

"I could probably find ten on this street alone, all of it junk. But I guess Fisher's got a plan."

“And it will be just the one man, you’re sure?”

“Yes. They’ll send the device with a lone courier because they don’t want to draw any attention. A courier will move quickly and quietly and be across the river before anyone notices him. It’s an effective tactic.”

The room was stark, with its sickly white paint peeling from the walls, and Simon felt uneasy. The only way in or out was through the door directly behind him, and he kept listening for sounds beyond it, which was difficult with the woman in the next room whose noises were getting louder and more urgent. “Effective until somebody leaks it, you mean.”

The bartender clenched his jaw. Clearly, he didn’t want to be known as an informant, the leak in Fisher’s unit. But Simon wanted to be unambiguous about where they stood. Better to lay all the facts out on the table.

“How will we know who he is?” Simon asked.

“Because I know who he is,” the bartender answered abruptly.

“Who?”

He hesitated now, his blind eye squinting. “His name is James. He has a scar that runs from his forehead down his cheek. He’s a big guy, but you wouldn’t know it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that he blends into the background. You never realize how big he is until it’s too late. And once he’s got his hands on you, it’s too late. It’ll be a shame to kill him, he’s useful.”

The bartender looked away, and Simon could see a man who had thought, probably for most of his life, that he was a good man, and now he was selling out someone he knew, maybe even a friend. Simon wondered what his angle was, or what Frank Baxter had on him.



“Why would you give him up?”

“That’s not your problem. You work for *him*; you’re worse than me. But if I was you, I’d be worried about James, because he won’t go down easy.”

“Was he military?”

“Sure was.” He finished his cider in one gulp. “So take that to Baxter. You tell him what I’ve said. Tell him I’ve finished my part of the deal. I’m done, you hear? Tell him that.”

“Three days?”

“Three days. You know the place.”

Simon finished his drink. “Thanks for the cider, I haven’t tasted anything like that in years.” He left the bar and the old man, who was staring at the floor with the empty glass in his hand and the white walls surrounding him, looking like he’d just sold his soul.

## 6. The Smell of Wood Smoke

“Three days.” Frank Baxter walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and peered down to the town thirteen floors below. “And this from our man inside?”

His study was spacious and dark, decorated with wood bookcases and heavy furniture. It was incongruous with the world outside, as if Frank existed in a private bubble, a hundred feet above his subjects.

“Right,” Travis said, fidgeting on the leather couch and rolling a cigarette. Some new tobacco from one of Frank’s greenhouses. It tasted like the Indian stuff he used to smoke years ago and reminded him of the “cheap smokes” signs alongside the highway on the reserve outside the city. He wondered if they were still there—the signs or the Indians.

Travis was one-quarter Mohawk, which barely qualified him as Indian when he was growing up on the reserve with his mother. When he was eighteen he moved to the city, and soon he met Frank who saw something in Travis that he liked. Frank needed a good right hand, someone a bit smart, who could listen and bash a head in a heartbeat. After the fall, Travis’s apprenticeship continued. Frank Baxter was built for a lawless world, seeing opportunity in all the pain, and his vision had captivated Travis. Like others in South Town recently, though, there was a part of him that thought Frank might be losing his edge.

“And this is the newest information?” Frank asked.

“No. More tonight. There was a meeting.”

“Who did you send?” Frank looked at him with concern; his worried looks were becoming more common these days.

“One of Harry’s men.”

“The fat man?”

“Yes,” Travis answered, “the fat man in the church.” Frank had set Harry up in the church years ago, but this was how he operated. His memory seemed to last as long as it took to get what he wanted, then he grew resentful.

“Is he still good at what he does?” Frank asked.

“No problems yet.”

“Good.” Frank turned from the windows and the grey sky. Smoke from the street drifted to the thirteenth floor, and Travis could smell the burning wood from hundreds of neighbourhood chimneys. Winter was here now, and that ever-present smell would permeate all of his clothes, everything he owned. Frank had crews bringing in loads of wood daily, the stacks in the main square opposite the church free to anyone who needed them. Travis remembered the smell of wood smoke as comforting when he was a child, but now it only meant that the cold would be upon them for months. Winters were hard. But Frank’s study was warm, it always was.

“This is no ordinary job. It will be very good for us, but very destructive if we fail.” Frank turned to Travis. “So we can’t fail, no matter what. The courier can’t get to Fisher. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Travis said. “I understand. Harry’s man is our best chance.”

Frank nodded. “Good. I know I said that this would best be handled anonymously. The less Fisher knows about who robbed him, the better. But we need to make sure the sense of urgency is high enough. Make sure Harry’s man knows who he’s working for, and make sure he’s paid well. And Travis, I want to meet him.”

Travis was surprised; Frank rarely met with anyone. “Okay.”

Travis hoped the meeting was over, but Frank’s unpredictability was growing with his reclusiveness. Frank’s face was lined with wrinkles, his hair grey at the temples, but he still

looked like the hard man Travis remembered from years ago. Frank had built South Town with his own two hands, the same hands that ran things now with an unforgiving stranglehold. And the people were thankful, even if they didn't realize it, lucky to live in a place sheltered from the savagery of the outskirts. But recently, Frank's intolerance had grown. He rarely left his guarded building, and he was growing out of touch with the people. This was a concern for Travis.

Frank was looking at the street below again. "Morale is low these days," he said absently. "I can feel it. What do you think, Travis? You're down there the most."

Travis thought for a moment, careful to say exactly what Frank wanted to hear. "You're right."

"Why do you think so?"

Travis hated when Frank asked questions he already knew the answer to. "Things have been good, and everyone knows that it's all because of you. But it's been a long time, and the town hasn't changed. That's what the people want. And this thing with the priests, they talk too much."

"I know," Frank said. "They talk and they talk. They don't understand what it takes to run this town."

"But the people don't remember what it was like before. The priests are getting stronger. They're outside that cathedral every day, giving food away."

"My food."

Travis lit the rolled cigarette. He'd been saving it until he was out of here, to enjoy by himself in the fresh air, but now he needed it just to get through the conversation. He felt as if the walls of Frank's study were closing in, and he needed a distraction to keep his hands busy. "Why don't you just kill them?" he asked.

Frank glared at Travis, steel blue eyes cold as the air outside. “Because it’s too late for that.” He banged his fist on the window. “These people amaze me. No matter what I do, they want more. They’ve grown too comfortable in my town.” He looked at the cigarette in Travis’s hand, the rising smoke. “The only way to kill the priests is to show the people what exists out there, across that river. Maybe it’s time we reminded them what it was like before.”

Travis took an awkward drag. The nicotine was a relief, flooding his veins and blood cells. The simple rush lasted a second, but it was enough.

Frank closed the blinds. “Remember what I said: sense of urgency.”

He opened the top drawer of his oak desk and pulled out a polished, black forty-five. Holding the silencer, about to screw it on, he instead placed it back in the drawer. He held the gun to his chest for a moment, tapping the buttons of his impeccable white dress shirt. “Paulo,” he said. “He let us down, Travis. He had instructions and couldn’t even keep the simplest task together. I know you brought him in, trained him, so don’t take it personally. It’s not a reflection on you.” He pointed the gun toward the study door. “The minute we show compassion what we built will come crashing down. Remember what I taught you: it’s all about optics, about what the people believe to be true. Send him in on your way out.”

The shot echoed down the brief hallway just as Travis shut the bathroom door. He flushed the toilet, not for the first time amazed at how the building had functional plumbing, the only building in all of South Town that did, and he still didn’t know how Frank had managed it. The flush was an attempt to drown out the sound he’d just heard, the shot ringing in his head. Frank wanted Travis to remember. Paulo had looked at him from the couch in the hallway outside Frank’s study, eyes pleading. He must have known what was coming, but there was no

fight in him. Travis was disgusted by his passivity, but still, Paulo didn't deserve to die. He deserved a punishment of some sort, of course. He'd fallen asleep on his watch, let three outsiders into the community. They were harmless, but that wasn't the point.

What power, Travis thought: to know your time has come and to go willingly. It was crazy. They'd been friends, sure, but what did that word really mean? Travis couldn't have saved him. It was Paulo who had the choice. He could have gone in there like a jackal, cut Frank's throat and everyone else's, but instead he just walked into Frank's study and certain death, and Travis couldn't understand why.

And as the sound of the shot pounded off the inside of his skull he told himself, as he had a hundred times before, that when his time came, he would go down taking everyone else with him, smiling friends and all.

## 7. The Fat Man in the Church

It was cold outside and already dark. Travis leaned back on the rear legs of the chair. The stone walls arched high overhead, and the cave-like room should have been freezing, but it was warm where he sat beside the cast-iron wood stove.

Travis watched Harry with curiosity, trying to appear angry that they were still waiting for Harry's man. But truthfully, he was happy to be out of the cold, even if he was inside the god-awful church, and in the company of Harry.

Fat, Travis thought, looking at Harry sitting across from him, fiddling with a coffee pot as they waited in silence. His unbuttoned shirt revealed his large barrel-like stomach, drum-tight bronze skin, and powerful chest and arms. Underneath his clean-shaven red face hung the gold chain he always wore. He was bigger than most people, but he wasn't particularly fat. Harry did well, if his stomach was any kind of indicator. And he had coffee. Even Frank didn't have coffee.

But Harry's careless appearance always struck Travis as inexcusably amateurish. Travis himself was well dressed each time he set foot outside his apartment. He had learned this from Frank, who managed to wear a clean, pressed shirt even among the depravities across the river. Frank insisted on using basement laundry rooms even when their next meals were unsure. He always said it was important to remain in control of whatever could be controlled, that just because the world had gone to shit, it didn't mean he should smell like shit too.

Travis looked around the vast cathedral room, feeling strangely weak and powerless. He lived by the doctrine that a scared man was the best kind to deal with, and nothing gave him satisfaction like a tough guy about ready to piss his pants. He had a gift for intimidation, but always felt uncomfortable inside the cathedral. Travis felt its weight, the centuries old stone

bearing down on him, making him small and breathless. It was one of the few places where he didn't have control, and Harry's indifference made things worse. He hadn't offered Travis a cup of coffee, and it smelled good. Harry's uncompromising nature was dangerous, one of the reasons he was untrustworthy.

"Coffee smells good," Travis said.

"Sorry, the pot's broke." Harry held the pot and lid in either hand and smiled at Travis.

Bastard, thought Travis. "Forget it then."

"I have white liquor. Terrible stuff, but it'll warm you just the same."

"Fucking forget it."

"Suit yourself."

Travis loosened his tie, which felt as though it was getting tighter. "How much longer is he going to be?"

"He's supposed to be back now. But you know the walk from North Town, unpredictable."

"You've used him before?" Travis asked.

"Many times."

"He's reliable?"

Harry's small, piercing eyes looked at Travis, his face getting redder. The flash of anger made him look bigger, wide and puffed-out, the coffee pot a tiny tin can in his hand.

"Absolutely. He's the best thief I've ever seen, undetectable. He'll be here."

"Good." Travis met Harry's glare. "Frank likes to know who works for him." With the mention of Frank, Harry faltered a little, and Travis felt powerful again. "I'll have that drink now," he said.



Harry poured a glass of the white liquor, and passed it across the big table. “The job,” he said. “Tell me again what we’re stealing.”

Travis considered the question, sniffing the alcohol before answering, “It’s not your problem.”

“It’s my man I’m sending, I need to give him complete information. I never send my men unprepared, they expect better from me.”

“You keep saying your men are the best. I’ve given you enough information to get the job done. I don’t want to see anyone get hurt, same as you.”

“You need my men because they’re skilled,” Harry said. “But you don’t give a shit about them. To you, they’re just another tool.”

Travis frowned. Nobody talked to him like that. He felt the anger building in his chest, and wanted to grab a stick of firewood and beat Harry until the respect oozed from him. But this would be bad for business. He shot back the white liquor and stared at Harry, wondering where his arrogance came from. It was true that he had carved out a nice little niche for himself, maybe he thought Frank needed him more than he needed Frank. Or maybe he simply disliked Travis, and actually had the guts to show it. Travis didn’t know which possibility was worse. Their power was only as strong as the people’s fear. And he didn’t like that Harry shared a building with the priests. As far as Travis knew, Harry was still independent of the priests, independent of everyone, but the opportunity was always there, and for good reason Frank feared an alliance.

The priests were getting stronger, their energy cascading through the town like a tidal wave. It didn’t matter that they weren’t actual priests, this was just a title that gave the people comfort. Some said there was a founding father, a true man of God who carved the path, but Travis didn’t believe this. These were regular men who wore brown robes, lived in a cathedral

and spoke about God like they knew him. But everybody had a past, and the priests acknowledged theirs. They prayed openly for forgiveness, and that authenticity rang true with the people. Their greatest strength was their eloquence, and no one spoke better than Father John, who gathered large crowds around the cathedral steps as he spoke about life without fear, musing about the absence of Frank Baxter, asking where he was when the people needed him most, preaching with his hands held up towards the sky, his eyes fixed on the tall apartment building to the west that was lit on most nights its generator rumbling across the otherwise quiet town like an angry beast.

Frank was right, they couldn't just kill Father John. The people loved him, were moved by him, and they didn't see the politician underneath with the gift of speech and laser vision.

"I can't give you any information, Frank's orders. We pay you to take risks. That's part of the deal," Travis said.

"Alright, Travis. But if it's more involved than you let on, the price goes up."

Travis shot back his liquor. "Fine." He looked at his watch. "What's his name?"

"No names."

"His name, Harry."

Harry looked down the short hallway to the steel door. His anger amused Travis, since it meant that he'd thrown Harry off his game. "I suppose you'll know it after tonight anyway," Harry said, folding his hands under his chin, and still looking down the hallway. "It's Simon."

"Tell him to come to Frank's building as soon as he gets in. Tell him Frank is waiting for him. And tell him to come alone. I'm not waiting here any longer."

## 8. The Proposition

“Your boss has an attitude problem,” Frank Baxter said between puffs of cigarette.

“Harry’s not my boss. I don’t have a boss.”

Frank was skinnier than Simon had expected, and older too, with gray hair at his temples and deep wrinkles around his eyes. His leanness was offset by broad, muscular shoulders, which combined with his towering height made him an imposing figure. But there was something in Frank Baxter’s eyes that made all other aspects of him secondary. His brutality was reinforced the moment Simon met his gaze way up on the thirteenth floor of the apartment building where the lights worked and the elevator had carried him up. Frank looked like a gray old tiger, past his prime but not unwilling or unable to face the challenge of a younger pup. Frank brought the brown cigarette to his lips and Simon noted that his hands were knotted like old tree roots, the power in them still very evident.

“That’s interesting,” Frank said. “Because he seems to think he is.”

“Maybe you misunderstood him. He would never claim to be my boss.” Simon was tired from the eight hours he’d spent walking, but his adrenaline was high from being face to face with Frank. He would need his wits to come out of this meeting successfully. It was important that he was respectful of Frank, but equally important that he not back down. Frank was a self-made man who’d fought for everything he had, and Simon figured he’d appreciate seeing this in a young ally. Simon was standing opposite Frank’s desk. Nobody had yet offered him a seat. He looked at the leather chairs, but Frank didn’t seem to notice.

“You work for him? He pays you?” Frank asked.

“Yes.”

“Then he’s your boss, whether you like it or not. This is a reality of this world. Just as I’m Harry’s boss, even if he would never admit it.”

“I understand.” Simon sat down in the chair, a relief to his tired legs. Frank pretended not to notice, but Travis Parker did, and he glared at Simon from across the room, standing perfectly still in his nice suit, like a statue in a museum.

“What I’m trying to say, Simon, is that a man must always be aware of the big picture. Just as with the animals out there, there is a food chain here, and we must respect it. Do you understand?” Frank leaned over his desk, knuckles pressed to the hard oak. “Let me put it another way to make it clearer for you—try to fuck me and you’re a dead man. You and everyone in your life.”

For a second, Simon regretted having sat in the chair so abruptly. Perhaps he had miscalculated.

But then Frank smiled. “Good,” he said. “Now we can talk.” He sat down in the matching chair, pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and offered it to Simon.

“You know many men would have stood through our entire meeting, looking at the chair and never making a move, but not you. Now, had you sat ten years ago, I would have killed you just because, but now I don’t see the need. You impress me, actually. I like to think there’s mutual respect, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Simon said.

“That sort of thing is hard to find these days for a man in my position.” He studied Simon for a moment, and then lit the match for his cigarette. “It’s a long walk from North Town, and you’re tired, so let’s get to business. What did the bartender have to say?”

“He was angry.”

“Everyone is angry. But he made his bed, believe that. A man makes a deal, he must pay what he owes.”

“He told me to tell you that he considers it closed.”

“So you work for him now?”

“I told him I’d pass on the message. In my work, it pays to keep your word.”

Frank nodded. “I can understand. Go on.”

“He said it would be one man, a courier, and he’d be alone.”

“He knows this for sure?”

“That’s what he said. The bartender knows him. The old man couldn’t hide anything if he wanted to.”

“And he’ll cross in three days?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

“He’s ex-military.” Simon paused, then added, “There’s something else too—Fisher’s got men in the city, more than just one courier. Something’s going down over there, but I figured you already knew that.”

“How did you find out?”

“I have a guy at the North Town gate. He tells me things.”

“How do you get him to do that?”

“Sometimes all it takes is a few of your cigarettes.” Simon said, taking a drag.

“Give them what they don’t have. Some of my men have tried to scale the wall, wouldn’t even think of paying someone off. You can see why I need to go through Harry to get a job like this done properly.”

“That’s because most of your men are psychopaths.”

Frank laughed, and then turned serious. “Very blunt.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Simon watched Travis shift uncomfortably. The nice suit didn’t fool Simon; Travis’s temper was infamous. But Simon wanted to make an impression on Frank, and figured he was smart enough to see things clearly, otherwise Simon wouldn’t be sitting in his office in the first place.

“Fisher’s men are too,” Simon continued. “I guess it goes with the territory. I see why you keep them around. Good for slash and burn jobs, and keeping the people in line.”

“Psychopaths. Tell me, do you think that clouds their judgment?”

“Well, that’s the problem. They don’t think too hard about anything. They react. They have no vision, no long-term goals.”

Frank stared at Simon, mesmerized. He exhaled and the smoke rose above his head in grey streamers, framing his nose and mouth, making his wrinkles appear deeper. “And you, do you have any long-term goals?”

“Staying alive.”

Frank smiled. “That’s a good goal. What about power? Do you ever think about that? I could use a guy like you. I’m surrounded by yes men and psychopaths, so you’ve just informed me. No one’s spoken to me the way you did just now since I was your age. What do you say, you want some steady work?”

“Let me think about it.”

“Fair enough. So listen, I want you to get it for me. The thing we’re after.”

“I don’t know. It sounds like just another slash and burn job.”

“It’s not. You’re not going to out muscle him. I’ve got a dozen other guys who could do that, but they always leave a mess behind, and that would get traced back to me. And that can’t happen this time around. This job needs to be done properly.”

“You could make it look like he was jumped.”

“By a loner? Too obvious. Fisher will expect that. Besides, the courier will be ready for it. He’s trained, you just told me. So if he’s killed by a loner, Fisher won’t buy it, and he’ll come after me.”

“So what do you want from me?”

Frank leaned back in the chair, and looked across the room at Travis. “Travis says you’re a thief, a pickpocket. So steal it.”

“He’ll be ready for that.”

“Maybe. But you’re the best, aren’t you? That’s what Harry says. And if you make it back in one piece, with the item, I’ll double your money. No need to tell Harry so he can take his cut, just straight to you.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Listen, Simon, the world is evolving, and the Harrys of this world are becoming obsolete. When evolution comes your way, you’d better make sure you’ve got the parts to survive. Don’t be a fish without gills. Be smart.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Frank put out his cigarette, stood and walked behind the desk. “I’ll give you three days to think about how you’ll spend the money, and then Travis is going to fetch you, and you’ll do the job.”

So that was it then, there was no choice. “I work best alone,” Simon said.

“Of course you do. Travis will make sure you get to where you need to get to. We can’t take any chances.”

“Alright then. Three days. What’s the score?”

“A hard drive.”

“Like for a computer?”

“Exactly.”

Simon was already picturing the hard drive, thinking ahead to the job.

Frank said, “I’ll see you after the job. And Simon, think about what I said. I could use you around here.”

When Simon left Frank’s office he walked back to the elevator, where one of Frank’s men was waiting to take him down. The stocky guard was holding a pump-action twelve gauge shotgun, a weapon Simon hadn’t seen in years. The only ammunition available in the community was forty-five caliber rounds, but Frank had his building guarded with shotguns. The sound of the elevator and the brightness of the lights, by-products of working machines, were also strange to Simon. All through Frank’s building were bits of history that lived on only in Frank’s presence, as he kept the best of the past for himself and tossed the scraps to the community to fight over like hungry wolves.

Simon thought about the hard drive he was going to steal. He remembered that they were small and portable, about this size of his hand. He remembered the computers that hummed at his friends’ homes, but not his own. Simon’s parents were proud that they owned neither a computer nor a phone. Somebody wants to talk to me, his father would say, they can walk down the driveway and talk to me. He felt the same about email, and especially social networks. He kept the family dislocated from the increasingly connected world not out of paranoia, but of revulsion



at what modern culture meant, which to Simon's father was nothing more than a gigantic advertising platform that hooked people from childhood, like a powerful drug. After India, the cabin home was Simon's parents' sanctuary, disconnected from the self-absorption and materialism of real life outside the sticks. But like the family farm outside Kochi, life in the muted cabin north of the city had hardly been Simon's idea of paradise, and he'd wanted only escape.

## 9. An Eye For Talent

Travis was unsettled by the meeting. The kid hadn't shown Frank the proper respect, and needed to be put in his place. In Travis's experience, violence was the best way to achieve this, as nothing put one's life into perspective as succinctly as a punch in the gut. That was how respect was taught, but Travis knew Frank wouldn't have it.

Travis moved from where he was standing against the far wall of Frank's office to one of the comfortable leather chairs, loosened his tie, and took a cigarette from his jacket pocket. Travis never smoked during a first meeting, as typically that eased tensions and made the other person feel comfortable, opposite to the effect he desired. Now that Simon was gone, Travis smoked freely.

Frank was looking out the window at the bits of light scattered down below, the candles in the windows and porches, mesmerized by their movement and their shadows cast in the cold winter night. "You clear, then?" He asked over his shoulder, not turning to face Travis.

"I don't like it."

"What don't you like?"

"The kid's a punk."

Frank thought for a moment, tapping the window, the old glass sounding brittle and thin, deceiving because there was a newer layer of thick glass on the outside that kept the cold, and potential threats, out. "Maybe. But he's good, right?"

Travis shrugged. "That's what Harry says."

"Then we go with him."

"But do you trust him?"

“As much as I trust anybody,” Frank said. “Simon’s a thief, which we need for the job. Fisher can’t suspect us, and if there’s a bloody mess, there won’t be a doubt in his mind about who did it. And we only have three days, so there’s no time do it any other way.”

“He seems too loyal to Harry.”

“Loyalty’s good. He just needs to see our side, and he’s been around long enough to know when he’s got to come around. He’ll come to us when the time is right.”

Travis knew a thing or two about loyalty, being Frank’s right hand man for the last twenty-two years, but now Frank barely consulted with him, as though their history together didn’t mean anything anymore. Travis had felt the distance between them grow over recent years, and now Frank’s mistrust was like a brick wall. “You really think he should go alone?” Travis asked.

“To a point. But you’ll be close enough to keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Travis nodded, but he wondered what was going on in Frank’s head. The kid was unproven. The only evidence they had of his ability was Harry’s word, which wasn’t good enough to bet on. Frank used to think that way too, but now Travis wondered about his judgment, if these lapses were signs of weakness, old age. But Frank didn’t look weak when he turned from the window, fixing his glare on Travis. “It’s a good plan. Simon’s the one we want.”

“If he fails?”

“Then you kill the courier and take the hard drive. It’s more important than anything. I’ll go to war with Fisher, if I have to.”

“And if the kid tries to fuck us?”

“He won’t. He’s been working for a paycheck his whole life, and he needs Harry, won’t do anything to screw it up. Harry’s the one we should be worried about; he’s the one who will betray us given enough time. Simon, though, I don’t even think he knows how good he is, but I can see it a mile away. The look in his eyes reminds me of myself years ago, back when I was his age. If he decides to keep working for us, good. If he wants to keep his distance, I can wait for him to come around.” He thought for a moment, then said, “And if I’m wrong about him, if he tries to fuck us, you kill him.”

Travis couldn’t stop a little grin from forming. Maybe he’d get to teach the kid a lesson after all. “If he steps out of line, I’ll make sure he never leaves the outskirts.”

“Good man.” Frank smiled, putting his hand on Travis’s shoulder. “You’re a good man. Always watching out for us, I appreciate that. The only problem, Travis, is that you’ve got no vision, you never have. But that’s alright, because I’ve got enough for both of us.”

Fifteen years ago, Frank would have made a point of turning the robbery into a bloodbath, just to let the other guy know it was him. Travis preferred the simplicity of life when it was just the two of them in the city after the fall, unbothered by things like politics. The world had changed in a moment, water pouring down the streets, the end beginning, and Frank was released as the people, unable to accept what their senses told them, scrambled, looking for high ground as they fled the crush of the city, the weight of the water. But Frank had known instinctively what was happening, as though the truth had been revealed to him in some long ago intimate moment, a secret laid to rest and then dredged up at the last second, and while the shock set in with the people, Frank acted. The power went down for the last time, mobile phones stopped working, police and soldiers dispersed like mice into tall grass, and Frank knew none of it was coming back. He made decisions quickly and without regret, and it kept them alive. The

first time Travis saw Frank kill, something died in Travis forever, or was born. In what used to be a busy intersection, Frank shot a man in front of a crowd for his twelve-foot aluminum fishing boat and six-horsepower Johnson outboard, and nobody stopped him. Murder was done, and the police weren't coming. The city was on its own.

Now Frank was different, speaking from some higher place of authority about vision and long-term goals, but it was all bullshit. He was missing the point: they had got to where they were by being obvious and deliberate, and changing the plan now didn't make sense; the people would see it as weakness. They were already talking about how Frank never left his building anymore, afraid to walk the streets, and it was up to Travis now to be the ruthless face of Frank Baxter, because Frank's was slipping away. Frank had taught him that their power was only as strong as the people's fear, and now he was breaking his own rule by letting the kid talk back to him.

Frank walked back to the window and Travis, figuring the meeting was over, got up to leave, but before he reached the door Frank said, "A man should always trust in what he knows, what has been proven over time to be true. In twenty years, I've never steered you wrong, Travis. Nothing else should matter to you. Stick to what you know, and don't go thinking too hard."

Travis nodded. "Okay, Frank."

He left the study, took the elevator to the ground floor, and headed toward the cathedral in the center of town. It was late, but not too late for the priests, whom Travis hated visiting almost as much as Harry and that goddamn cathedral.

The night was cold and the streets deserted, but Travis wasn't afraid. The people knew him well, and kept their distance, and if somebody had the guts to make a move, they'd better come hard and fast and kill Travis quick, because they would damn well regret it if they didn't.

## 10. Anton

From his hideout on the thirteenth floor, Anton Vargas watched the building across the street while he ate a handful of sunflower seeds, his late-night snack purchased yesterday from an old Ukrainian lady in the tunnel. The variety of food was one of the perks of a big-city life, or of a place bigger than any he knew, at least.

The blinds on the windows of Frank Baxter's office were never closed, giving Anton a clear view inside the room. The glass was bullet proof though, that's what the people in town believed. Otherwise, Anton wouldn't still be here in a freezing cold condominium in South Town, waiting, watching, and trying to figure out a plan. Instead, Frank would have a bullet in his head, and Anton would be headed south to someplace warm, with a beach.

The people of South Town seemed to think that Frank Baxter's world was all there was, but Anton knew better, from spending the last several years drifting from place to place, small pockets of settlements along the river, hunters and gatherers leading simple, diluted lives. But Anton never stayed anywhere for very long, because despite himself, he found that he was heading steadily northward, drawn like a compass needle to South Town, that place where bad men congregated.

Anton was an imposing figure, six feet tall and two-hundred pounds, with hands like cinder blocks, and a thick beard that he'd grown for his return. His most defining feature, however, was the constant expression of brooding, the simmering rage and intensity that caused people to turn away from him on the street, his violence a radar signal, an electromagnetic pulse.

He'd walked around the old neighbourhoods, barely recognizing South Town and what were once his favorite places, feeling the ghosts of his past life peering at him from inside the devastated houses. The people, too, were unfamiliar, looking tired and fearful, some famished

and covered in impetigo, the skin disease that Anton knew to stay clear of. A long time ago, Anton loved this town; there used to be pride in it, filling the people with courage and hope. What he saw now was as bleak as the slippery mud that clogged the streets, making them virtually impassable.

It hadn't taken Anton very long to find Frank. There was only one building in town that had guards around it, a razor-wire fence, and power. Nobody lived in tall buildings since having to climb many sets of stairs every day made them impractical, but in Frank's building the elevator worked. Anton had heard the generator fire up like an extinct beast, and felt the mechanical hum in his bones, his teeth.

Frank never left the protected building. Anton had heard the rumours that Frank had got scared, saw his enemies around every corner and brick, and had barricaded himself inside for the last year. Frank's sycophants ran the town, and he met with them daily on the thirteenth floor. Mostly, Frank met with Travis Parker, the small, well-dressed man who was Frank's muscle and had the reputation of a killer. Anton hoped to be face to face with him someday as well. But most of all, Anton wanted Frank, and to get to him he would need to find a way into the building, and that wouldn't be easy.

The three sets of three guards walked the perimeter of the fence twenty-four hours a day, in eight-hour shifts, pacing continually, covering a third of the area around the building, so that their line of sight would take in the other guards, and they looked for each other before they turned and walked in the other direction. The result was that the guards were not only aware of possible threats, but of each other, which meant that compromising one of the guards and slipping into the building undetected was impossible.

Anton watched a guard step out from the cover of the building's awning, the moon lighting him up, a shotgun cradled across his chest as he scanned the dark street. Anton figured he could take him, no problem. He could wait for a night when the moon was hidden behind clouds, sneak up on him, and then he would be inside. But that would leave the other two guards coming around shortly who would see a body or nothing, either way disastrous. Even if he managed to kill all three guards, the shooting would alert the rest of Frank's men, and then getting inside the building would be the least of Anton's worries. The guards, too, seemed uncompromising, well-fed and well-trained, meaning that bribery was out of the question. Not that Anton had anything to bargain with; it was just a thought.

Anton knew that Frank wasn't scared, like the rumors said. Frank knew the risks and took precautions, a fair concern considering a bit of paranoia was healthy for a powerful man. Frank expected a North Town hit man, but he had it wrong, it wasn't Fisher he should be afraid of, it was Anton, and maybe without even knowing it he sensed Anton's presence from across the street. Anton hoped so. He wanted to look into Frank's eyes when it happened, so that Frank would remember.

Anton's brother always told him that violence was a good man's last resort. If his brother were here now, Anton would tell him that his hatred for Frank Baxter, which he had carried all these years was now unbearable, consuming him, defining him completely. He needed to be rid of it.

A long time ago there was goodness in Anton. Each winter when his family headed south to the ocean, Anton went to the beach most every day with his older brother, the two inseparable. The sun was bright then, the air clear, and the ocean was so blue that it still burns in his memory. Back then he lived for the companionship of his brother.



Frank Baxter took that from him, and now Anton lived to see him dead.

## 11. Stash

Simon's talent for reading people was integral to his type of work. A good thief, one who dealt as closely with his marks as he did, caught small nuances of expression, things that people meant but never said, and he knew from their brief meeting that Baxter needed him more than he'd let on. And for all the apprehension Simon felt, the opportunity to work for Baxter also opened up new possibilities, cutting out the middleman, which meant more money. But there was a downside. Simon sensed that Baxter saw something of himself in him, which scared Simon, because what could he have in common with a man like that? Nothing good. An aptitude for survival, perhaps, and the ability to make a living amongst the ruins that constituted this world, but Baxter was way beyond that, not only surviving but capitalizing on misery, building a community on it, whereas Simon just wanted to get by and maybe, with some luck, get out while he still could.

Simon's compact apartment had just a bathroom, kitchen, and a combined living and sleeping area. He spurned the idea of living in one of the larger, vacant apartments throughout South Town, feeling safer in a small space where he could quickly react to any threats. The barren living area contained only the fundamentals: couch, coffee table, small pile of books, both fiction and non, a stack of wood for the fireplace, candles, and a single item that spoke to Simon's personality—a large photograph hanging on the wall of a cow hitched to a cart in the banana fields of the Malabar Coast. He'd found it in a house in South Town two years ago, brought it back to his apartment, and framed it. The blue cart was piled high and nearly overflowing with banana stalks, and the two taking the produce to market looked like father and son, dark skinned and wearing dhotis. Every time Simon looked at the photo, he could almost feel the South Indian heat of his childhood, smell that distinct Goan smell.

The bathroom was no longer functional, replaced by a series of outhouses in the courtyard that served the inhabitants of the small building, a half-dozen or so single men. Baxter's growers collected the shit from the outhouses a few times a month, using it as fertilizer in the big gardens, the huge plantations and the two greenhouses that yielded crops year-round. Everything from potatoes and tomatoes to fruit trees grew in these warehouses, which had sections of their roof cut out and replaced with clear plastic tarps and scavenged plexiglass. Inside were a multitude of solar panels and reflective surfaces that exaggerated the poor light in darker months. Baxter had scores of men working in and protecting the greenhouses, as they solidified his position in South Town more than anything else. The vendors in the tunnel bought from the growers, and the people bought from the vendors, but the whole operation fell under Baxter, a portion of every coin made kicked up the chain, with Baxter at the top.

For the unfortunates who couldn't afford food or other essentials, Baxter provided for them through a system of credits, where repayment for items came in the form of favors owed. These favors could be anything from cutting wood in the outskirts, to carting vegetables from the greenhouses to the tunnel, to digging new outhouse holes and burying old ones. If Baxter recognized larger potential, he had the unfortunates do more important work, like aiding Baxter's men in evicting a squatter, or helping in the execution of a traitor or loner strayed too far from the outskirts. Baxter found strengths in people they didn't know, or want to know, they had. Through favors, he played the town against itself, getting those with nothing to lose to do his dirty work, especially useful when something needed to be done against a member of the community. In this style, Baxter fed the starving, delivered wood to the cold, and found work for the unemployed, but never without a catch. Some preferred to starve than to become indebted to Frank Baxter.

Simon closed the blinds and made sure the deadbolt on the door was secure before he carefully moved the heavy couch from its place against the wall to the middle of the room. Using a jackknife, he pried up a section of hardwood flooring to reveal a big space underneath filled with his stash of canned goods, dozens of tins, along with fertilizer and survival gear including: a compass, roadmap, tent, sleeping bag, matches, fishing rod and hooks. He had gathered and stockpiled all this over the years from his excursions through the outskirts, preparing for a moment when he might have to leave quickly. Now he had enough to sustain himself for months. But the one piece he was missing was the one thing that would allow him live independently—seeds. With a successful, sustainable garden, like Baxter's greenhouse system, could come freedom from South Town. Getting into Baxter's greenhouses, however, was an impossible endeavor; not even Octavio had the pull to score the amount of seeds Simon would need to start over.

He took out two cans, then covered the hole and moved the couch back. In the kitchen, where he kept sheets of plywood stacked against the wall, he took a hammer from a drawer and pounded the plywood over the windows with rusty nails. This was how most things from before looked—rusted, broken or useless. The nails had probably been used a hundred times, pried out, flattened, and then pounded into something else. In North Town, anything could happen—a one-day job could turn into a week—and he wanted his apartment as secure as possible. Not that he had anything of real value, and he doubted even the most thorough thief would find what was under the couch, but still, he felt an instinctive urge to protect his home, however sparse it was.

After securing the windows he cut a piece of bread from a loaf he'd bought in the tunnel, poured some boiled river water, and thought about the job. Baxter had made it sound like a straightforward pick pocket job, but nothing was ever that simple, there was always a catch. In

this case, the catch was that the courier was military-trained, and would be driven by the single purpose of getting the hard drive across the river and into North Town. If Simon was lucky, the courier would have the hard drive in a pocket or bag, and Simon could execute a simple lift, taking the hard drive and replacing it with an object of similar weight and shape, and be on his way. If the courier had the hard drive somewhere closer to his body where he could feel it, as Simon would in his place, the lift would be much more difficult, even impossible. Baxter had made it clear that the courier wasn't to be harmed, but if Simon couldn't get the hard drive his way, there would be no other choice but to take it by force. He had a feeling that Travis Parker would ensure the hard drive came back to South Town, one way or another. Simon could tell that Parker—a slash and burn man if there ever was one—didn't like the idea of the job being handled by Simon. Could be he'd want to prove Simon incapable, the smallest misstep resulting in a bullet in the back of Simon's head somewhere along the River Road.

Simon feared a similar fate awaited Harry, but only after Frank got a few of Harry's men on side. Harry was the closest thing to a friend Simon had, but the question wasn't about friendship, it was about survival. Anyway, Simon didn't doubt that Harry already knew the plot against him, and was taking measures.

The bread was fresh with a nice crust and Simon savored it. Few things tasted as good as fresh bread. Simon had three days until the job, and he didn't plan on hanging around his apartment by himself thinking too much. Soon, he'd have more money than he'd ever had before, and despite himself, he smiled. He thought about Frank Baxter's office in the tall building, and all the luxuries that set it apart from the rest of South Town. But Simon had to remind himself that what really mattered was the future, most importantly that South Town wasn't the end. He had daydreamed many times about the log cabin up north, wondering what it

looked like now, if the road was overgrown, if the garden was still there. He wondered if good people were living there, a family perhaps, hunting and working the garden, the children playing nearby. In the evenings, maybe they talked, and read the children stories in front of the fire. If bad men came, the man would send them off with Simon's father's rifle, its rounds hidden under the kitchen floorboards.

Simon envied this family.

He thought about the woman in the market. She hadn't left his mind since the moment he'd met her. He felt a strange connection to her in a way that he couldn't quite explain. It was more than simply the desire to see her again. Meeting her had felt like the most natural thing in the world, as though she'd always been there on the periphery, waiting for the right moment to present herself, a perception his mother would have called fate. He pictured her walking away, remembering swish of her skirt, the bounce of her hair, her delicate features and her beautiful smile. But more than anything he remembered her green eyes, the way they had penetrated him with ease, like she'd known him for years.

## 12. Father John

The cathedral was big and so cold Travis was sure that if there was enough light he'd be able to see his breath. Parts of the choir loft and apse were well lit though, and his eyes were naturally drawn to the vaulted ceiling with its great spires, hand-painted crucifix, and stained-glass windows that were colourless at night.

Churches, the cathedral especially made Travis uncomfortable. Could have been the Mohawk in him, or the fact that his mother, while she hadn't had particular misgivings about organized religion, was indifferent. Travis's first time in a church was for the funeral for one of Frank's men. He'd been amazed at the artistry, the history that enveloped the century-old building, but felt awkward, following the examples set by other men. The funeral mass was like penance to Travis, comparable to his experience in school, where he was mostly bored and irritated, dismissing what he didn't understand.

Father John always kept Travis waiting, as though he had many other pressing issues to tend to. Travis suspected that was part of the priests' carefully designed method of projecting themselves. The priests' power was much different from Frank's, built on intangibles, the emptiness that could flood a person's soul. That was its brilliance, and the growing lineups at the cathedral, and the hope in people's eyes, confirmed that the priests' influence was expanding. Frank had no choice but to forge an understanding with them, but the priests were ambitious, and looked for cracks among those of Baxter's men who had weapons. They were the real key to overthrowing Frank and winning the support of South Town.

The people might believe in God and the word of the priests as their ticket to transcendence, to the next world. But Frank Baxter was still the God of here and now.

Father John knelt in the front row and made the sign of the cross before he sat and turned to Travis. He was a stout little man with a pudgy face, big beard, and wide, bright eyes. Travis thought Father John grew the beard to hide his pinkish, watery countenance that testified to how comfortable life inside the cathedral was, despite the camouflage of coarse burgundy robe tied with yellow rope. During the warmer months, the priests went around bare foot, but today Father John wore plastic sandals over wool socks.

Travis didn't understand why he'd begun to seek the priest's company, yet every time he neared the cathedral he felt as if all the bad things he had ever done were being pulled from deep inside him and thrust into the open for the world to scrutinize. Usually, he took pleasure in the peoples' frightened looks, but increasingly now, the fear that he had long thrived on was becoming a yoke. He imagined the people merely acted afraid to keep him quiet, and he couldn't shake the idea that perhaps they were biding their time, waiting for a moment when they would descend on him in a mob and beat him into the mud and ice that covered the ground outside their homes.

The first time they'd met, Father John had sensed Travis's apprehension, and spoke of it to him. In a way, Father John was just like Frank.

"You're late, Travis."

"You know I can't be seen here."

Father John nodded solemnly and leaned over the pew to get closer to Travis. "Do you know what the people are saying?"

"I know."



“A lot has changed since we last talked. It’s winter, and the poorest have no food. They line up outside the cathedral because Frank won’t help them. They say he’s turned his back on them.”

Travis shifted uncomfortably. “They say it because you do.”

“Do you really believe that? If we didn’t feed those people, nobody would. Frank would let them starve in their homes.”

“They have the skin disease; we can’t risk the community.”

“We feed them every day, and the impetigo hasn’t spread to the congregation.”

“You’ve been lucky.”

“Perhaps.”

“You lie to them, too.”

“How so?”

“By giving them Frank’s food, and saying it’s yours. Your fucking speeches from the church steps. You’re trying to make him the enemy.”

“Frank *is* the enemy.”

“He made this town,” Travis said, glaring at the priest.

“Yes he did, and maybe a long time ago his methods were acceptable. The people put up with them because he protected them. But what has he done for them lately that justifies his violence?”

“Without fear, the town will fail.”

Father John frowned. “Is that what he’s told you all these years, why you follow him? Frank’s way can’t last forever; the people won’t accept it.”

Travis shook his head, his face going flushed, but he fought the anger building inside him and let the priest speak, wondering if maybe he was just afraid to hear what he knew was the truth.

“Do you remember the last time we spoke? You told me about your mother, your upbringing on the reserve. I’ve forgotten the tribe, what was it?”

“Mohawk.”

“Yes, Mohawk, that’s right. They were an eastern people, part of the Iroquois confederacy if I remember correctly. Tell me, what do you know about your people?”

Travis shrugged. “Not too much. I’m a quarter Indian, it meant nothing on the reserve, and my mother didn’t want to teach me about the old ways. I left when I was eighteen.”

“To work for Frank Baxter.”

“Yes.”

“Your past is who you are, Travis. I’m not talking about your time with Frank, and everything that’s happened since the fall, but before that. If you can remember that, maybe you can remember who you really are.”

“This is who I am.”

“Your guilt is eating you alive, the people outside the cathedral, the faces. If this is who you are, then why do you feel this way?”

“I don’t know.”

Father John breathed deeply, his eyes wide and patient. “What do you remember?”

Travis thought back to the reserve, his mother’s little yellow house on the gravel road near the school. “There’s one thing,” he said. “There was an old man who lived down the street from my mother, named Jack. He had long grey hair that used to be black and seashell earrings. I

remember that he was small and weak-looking, but all summer long he would be outside working in his yard. The summer I was twelve he was tilling a big section of his backyard to make a garden, and my mother told me to go and help him, so I did. Jack knew a thing or two about the Mohawk, and he was happy to tell me stories. There was one he repeated, which I never forgot. The Mohawk believed that before the world was created there was an island in the sky inhabited by sky people, and one day a woman fell through a hole in the sky. She fell for a long time through darkness until eventually, there was light, and she saw the oceans, and a flock of birds caught her and let her down on the back of a turtle. The otter and the beaver brought mud up from the bottom of the ocean and placed it on the turtle's back until earth began to form and get bigger. The turtle's back became the woman's home, a great land, and she planted the things she had brought down from the sky, tobacco and other things, and made a life and became the mother of all Mohawk people. That's the story I remember."

Father John looked thoughtful for a moment, his eyes on the candles in the choir loft, before he said to Travis. "When you think about who you are now, think about this story, and try to remember who you were, because that is more important than anything else."

"It's just a story."

"It's much more than that. What happened to Jack?"

"Cancer. He was a smoker. They said the Indian stuff was better for you, but I never believed it."

"That must have upset you terribly."

"No. I was older when he died, and I'd stopped seeing him by then."

"Why did you stop seeing him?"

“Because I didn’t give a shit about the Mohawk anymore, or his stories. All I wanted was to get off that reserve and go to the city.”

“And you did.”

Travis fidgeted in his seat, rubbing his cold hands together. “It’s late, I need to go.”

“There’s no rush. Frank’s men won’t be near the cathedral at this hour.”

“I have things to take care of.”

“We all do, but that’s not why you’re hurrying off.” Father John’s expression changed, eyes becoming wider, reflecting the yellow flame of the candles. “You have to face it sometime, your past, your relationship with Frank. It’s coming to a head, and you know it. I think you’re afraid of consequences you can’t control. You see the changes happening in this town, and you don’t know where you’ll fit into them.”

Damn priest, thought Travis. And like every time he met with Father John and the priest’s words began to infiltrate his brain, a change came over Travis. The guilt he felt became muted, the wrath of the people, dulled. Talking to Father John was like ingesting a powerful drug. Travis lowered his eyes. “I still have time,” he said.

“Yes, you have some time, but not much. Your redemption lies along one road, Travis, and it’s not the one you’ve been on.”

“I’ve been what I needed to be to survive, just like you. I don’t need redeeming.”

“Then why are you here talking to me?”

“I don’t know.”

Father John looked for a moment at the crucifix and stained glass windows near the vaulted ceiling. “You know, this beauty astounds me. After all these years, it remains. And you’re here because God sent you here.”

“No.” Travis said.

“Ah, but, you don’t believe in God, do you? You believe in nature. So then, if you like, nature sent you here, because this way leads to the next phase of evolution. You sense it. You’ve felt it for awhile now, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“God sent you to us, and soon you’ll see that.” Father John put his hand on Travis’s shoulder, reaching across the pew, crossing the distance between them with his robed arm and gold-ringed finger, his stately presence, and Travis realized that the priest was making an offer.

Eventually, Travis knew, he would have to choose a path. But tonight the priest was blunter than usual, rushing into territory he had previously avoided or only delicately alluded to. “I need more time,” Travis said.

“You need to decide quickly, because God won’t wait forever.”

“You keep mentioning God. Don’t forget who you’re talking to. And that I’m talking to you, not God.”

Father John squeezed Travis’s shoulder. “The only way to help you is to make you see the right way.”

Travis jerked backed from the priest’s hand. “God hasn’t sent me to you,” he snapped. “There is no God.”

He got up, leaving Father John alone in the pew, and the weight of the cathedral lightened with each step. Outside, the cold night air was fresh and clean, and he breathed it deeply in, taking pleasure in the quiet and the darkness. As he walked back to his apartment his head began to clear, his thoughts turning to the job, and the words of the priest faded in the night air.

## 13. Eva

The North Town market brought back memories of Simon's childhood in India. His parents, who were poor farmers, had a booth at a local market where they sold vegetables weekly. Simon felt at home wandering through the market stalls, but today he wasn't looking for his next meal. He was there to find the woman.

It was early afternoon when he'd arrived, the same time of day as when he'd first run into her, but as evening closed in, the vendors were starting to pack up and he thought he might not find her. He was beginning to think he was crazy walking twenty kilometers to find a woman whose name he didn't even know, and for a fleeting moment a voice in the back of his mind told him that even if he did find her she wouldn't remember him, or she wouldn't care. But he remembered what his mother always told him. Life, she would say, provides us what we need, our job is to recognize when it does.

He was at the last remaining stall, purchasing a handful of nice looking tomatoes, when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see her standing there. "What's the price?" she asked.

"Three for a half," he said. "I'd never pay more."

She laughed. Her hair was up, like she'd been at work all day. "I'm surprised to see you here; I thought you said you weren't from North Town."

"I'm not." He held up his bag. "Best tomatoes around."

"They don't have a market in South Town?"

"They do, but . . . how did you know I was from South Town?"

"You're either from South Town or the outskirts, and if you were a loner, you wouldn't be in the market. Seems like a long way to come for produce, don't you think?"

“That depends on how you look at it. I mean, we get fruit in South Town.” He took a bright, flawless tomato from his bag. “But nothing like this. This is something special. Definitely worth the walk.”

“Are you an expert?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not really. Before the fall my parents had a farm, sold their goods in a market that looked a lot like this one. I used to work the booth when I was a kid. But you don’t have to be an expert to know what’s good and what’s not. Growing it’s a different story, that takes real talent.”

“I know what you mean. I work in Fisher’s greenhouses.”

“So we have something in common,” Simon said. “Did you grow these?”

She looked closely at the tomato in his hand. “I do recognize that one,” she said, “There’s a very good chance I did.”

Simon laughed. “What’s your secret?”

“We have good soil, scavenged from an abandoned garden depot. Good soil is the foundation of everything. But for great tomatoes, the key is lots of foliage. Plants that have lots of leaves produce the best tasting fruit, and that comes down to water and sunlight management.”

“Wow,” said Simon. “You *are* an expert.”

She laughed. “I take pride in what I do. And I’m lucky to have a job. I can’t complain about that. What about you, what do you do?”

“I have the kind of job that I can’t really talk about.”

“Oh I see,” she said. “That’s too bad; I was beginning to like you.”

“But I haven’t worked in awhile,” he said quickly, not wanting to scare her off.

“Why not?”

“Because the job’s been getting to me.”

“So why do it?”

He shrugged. “Because a man needs to eat.”

“I can appreciate that. So does a woman, even if she’s alone. You know, it seems like a big coincidence that we would run into each other again after I just met you yesterday. I’ve lived here my whole life, and I’ve never seen you before.”

He smiled. “Some things are just meant to be.”

“Is that so?” she asked.

“Yes. But I also believe that we can direct our own fates.”

“Kind of like selective destiny.”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to call it. It’s like we’re given a handful of coins, and we have to decide what to spend them on, and sometimes you have to decide quickly if you really want something, because it might not be there the next day. But eventually, you run out of coins, and all you have left is what’s in your cupboard.”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“From my mother. She was an interesting woman. Taught me a lot.”

“I learned a lot from my mother too. Sometimes I wonder how I survived without her. Tell me, did you really walk all this way to buy the best fruit in the towns?”

“No, I came here to find you.”

She smiled. “Really?”

“I know it sounds crazy. But I want you to know that I’m not a bad person. I’m not like most of the men here. I want to get to know you. Can I know your name?”

“My name is Eva,” she said, holding out her hand and Simon shook it.



“I’m Simon.”

“Do you really believe in all that stuff, Simon, or is it just another line you use on all the girls?”

“It’s no line. And what else is there to believe in here if it isn’t the hope that there’s something better, and all we have to do is keep looking for it?”

“Hope of something better is the only thing we can hope for.”

The last remaining vendor had closed up and departed, and the market was emptying of people. Soon it would be just the two of them on the quiet, dusky street. “Now that you’ve found me, what do you plan to do?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

“Would you like to walk me home, Simon?”

“I’d like that.”

They walked the narrow streets toward the river and her apartment, the biting wind blocked by buildings on either side. He felt her energy, the warmth radiating off her, and realized he hadn’t been this close to a woman in years. He sensed that she, too, hadn’t talked like this to a man in a very long time, and he felt a connection to her that was unlike anything he’d ever felt before. It wasn’t part of his life, meeting a woman. His was a job that allowed no distractions. But Eva was different; already he knew this. She was transcendental somehow, a sign, and his mother always taught him to follow the signs.

“Is it difficult working for Fisher’s men?” he asked.

“Fisher’s guys mostly leave me alone because I do a good job, and because they trust me. I tend the gardens in the greenhouses, ensure the crops are full and healthy. But sometimes, if

they don't know me or if they're drunk, they'll make trouble. It's never anything I can't handle. Being alone always carries its risks. And nighttime, I wouldn't even consider it. But I'm lucky to have the job, and I'm better off than most people here. I'm careful, I don't take chances."

"So why take a chance with me?" he asked.

"Because I think you're different."

They arrived at a red brick low-rise apartment building. He heard the rush of moving water in the distance. "This is where I live," she said. "The river is just over there, beyond those trees. I like knowing that it's there. Like an escape route, or something. You know what I mean?"

Simon nodded; he understood perfectly. He walked her through the lightly snow-covered courtyard and up the fire escape that switch-backed its way up the four storeys of red brick, opened the fire escape door, and walked down the hall to the third door on the right, the one without a number on it. She invited him in to eat, and he accepted.

Eva's place, like most people's, was spare. The desire to collect material goods had faded for many, now that things meant nothing. Possessions amounted to what could be stuffed into a backpack at the last second before the shit came crashing down again. Simon's parents had lived by this same philosophy, ahead of their time it seemed to Simon, as if they were preparing him. Simon looked at her simple one room apartment, which was similar to his own, but with the softness of a woman's touch that manifested in the smallest, prettiest details: the flower pattern of a curtain, the florid placement of a trio of scavenged candles, the hand-drawn detail around her fireplace. He looked at the small white photo album she kept by her bed, considering its

perfect simplicity: a few memories, a couple of images, all she needed. He pictured her as a child, leaving some burning place with the album clutched to her chest, and admired her courage.

They finished a simple meal of potatoes, carrots and meat cooked in her reflector oven with a shot of the white liquor, then she blew out the two candles on the small dining table, leaving the fire the only source of light in the room. They sat on a rug in front of the fireplace, their shadows long and intermittent on the opposite wall.

Eva had a way of shutting out the world, so that Simon felt as if it was just the two of them, before the fall. His vague youthful memories of the past were faded now. For Simon, the last fifteen years had eclipsed much from before, the past living on only in small, defining images. He had found that over time, certain words and concepts had begun to lose meaning, living on only in books, which Simon kept a good pile of in his apartment. But still, the meaning of certain words and concepts drifted farther and farther away so that Simon struggled to understand what they meant. A strong image, however, seemed to sharpen over time, growing more brilliant in contrast, and this was how he saw the past.

But with Eva, no matter what existed outside the walls of her apartment, whatever they had between them right now was timeless, independent of everything else. She told him that what she wanted more than anything was to live life with a free and open heart, the way, she argued, it was meant to be lived.

“You haven’t asked me about my job,” he said. “And I appreciate that. I want to be honest with you, so I’ll tell you. I steal things for people who pay well, and in South Town that’s Frank Baxter. I do a job, and I get paid and I don’t have to work again for a while, and then I do another job.”

“You work for Frank, I work for Fisher. I don’t hold that against you.”

“But it’s not who I am, and I’m not sure I can do it anymore.”

“Sounds like a confession.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe I needed to get it out. I used to be able to lie to myself about what I was doing, separate it from who I believed I was, but I can’t do that anymore. I can’t disassociate. I look at the poorest people in South Town, the men and women begging for handouts at the church steps, and I know that what I’m doing is hurting them because it makes Frank more powerful.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. As long as I stay in South Town, I’m a thief. To leave, is, well, nobody leaves, not ever. You know that. There’s nowhere to go, the outskirts are just too dangerous.”

“There’s always somewhere to go,” she said. “There are always options, even here. Just because nobody leaves, doesn’t mean it can’t be done.”

“What about the loners?”

“Maybe it’s not as bad as they say.”

“I’ve seen the loners, come in from the outskirts. You must have too.”

“I’ve seen people who were starving and they were shot like animals because Fisher’s men said they were animals. They were starving and they were desperate, and they were killed for it.”

“So you don’t believe it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to believe. But I do know that anything would be better than this place. I’ve lived here for more than half my life, ever since I was a little girl, and I understand that this is no way to live. I can’t leave my apartment at night because I’m a

woman. People starve while our greenhouse overflows with food because Fisher needs it to trade for cigarettes from South Town. There is so much wrong.”

“You’re right, there is. But to leave would be the biggest risk of all, wouldn’t it?” He looked at her. “You remind me of my parents. They left everything they knew because they wanted to start a new life.”

“You see, it can be done.”

“That was before the fall.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m sure they had their own challenges, which they faced. Freedom, Simon, is a state of mind, and the longer you stay here, the more it fades.”

She leaned on her elbow with her back to the fire, bare arm glowing in the light of the flames. “I’ve heard something. People are saying that men are crossing the river. One of the women at the greenhouse said she knows for sure, says she knows someone who’s been over there. Do you know anything about that?”

Simon didn’t want to lie to Eva, but knowledge of the hard drive would put her in danger, so he looked away, tried to appear disinterested. “No.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” she said.

He smiled. “Only with you.”

“So it’s true, then. What does it mean?”

“It could mean anything.”

“Is that why you’re here now?”

“No, I’m here to find you.”

“Why would anybody want to go over there? There can’t be anything good across the river, nothing but bad memories. And now they’re going back. I don’t understand it.”

“Maybe they’re looking for something.”

“For what?”

“Anything. The outskirts have all been picked through. The towns, the highways, there’s nothing left. So that leaves one place, close enough that we can see it. It was only a matter of time before we went across the river. Maybe that’s what Fisher’s after over there, something that could help us all.”

“Help us or help him?”

“Both. What helps him will help us.”

“I surprised to hear you say that, after everything we’ve talked about.”

Simon didn’t know what to think. There was no question about the kind of men who ran the towns, but when Simon looked at Eva, the word that had appeased him through his years in South Town kept echoing in his head: order. Because if things changed too quickly, Eva and all the women and young families would be the most vulnerable. The very system Eva despised ensured her safety, as long as she played by its rules. Simon didn’t blame her, though, for thinking there was a better way to live.

They didn’t speak for a while, and then Simon said, “When it happened I was a teenager. After India, we lived in the cabin, but I always wanted to be in the city, because that’s where the action was. I had a friend there and I would take the train down on Friday night and stay at his house until Sunday when I would return home. His parents had all the modern electronic things that we didn’t, like television and computers. So we’d hang out at his house during the day, and then we’d go out at night, wandering around the streets, always coming back late. Then the water came. You remember how it was—instant, no time to think. We managed to get back to my friend’s house—his name was Anthony—and we watched the television as the news reports

came in. Things were bad all over. My parents had no phone, and I'd never given them Anthony's number so they couldn't contact me. I stayed with Anthony and his family hoping the water would recede so I could go back home, but it didn't. After a couple of weeks the power was off for good, and we had no idea what was going on outside the city. The food was dwindling and the cops were gone, probably home to their own families. I remember that Anthony's parents were well off and had a nice house on a hill in a good neighbourhood, and for a couple of blocks around the house, there was no water. People began to arrive on the street. I remember the look on Anthony's father's face when the gang arrived. He was an outdoorsman and had an old hunting rifle, swore he'd defend us, but I looked out the front window and saw the type of men I'd known in India, and I knew Anthony's father and his rifle didn't stand a chance. They came up the drive nice enough, told us they wanted our food and water, wouldn't hurt us if we just gave it to them. Anthony's father shouted back they could go to hell. The leader of the gang laughed, because he knew immediately who stood to lose what, and I knew for certain if I stayed in that house I'd be dead. So I went into the kitchen, took a bottle of water and a couple of granola bars and snuck out the back door. That night I hid in the woods behind their house and listened to the arguing, then the gunshots. The gang could have just moved on to the next house but it had become personal, and they had to make a point of settling the score and getting what they came for. Anthony's father was courageous; he killed two men before he ran out of ammunition. Then the gang stormed the house and killed everyone inside, did worse to Anthony's mother. Some people are built for those kinds of situations, and others are able to adapt quickly, and while I listened to Anthony and his parents screaming as they were murdered, all I wanted was to be home with my parents, safe in the cabin, and away from the madness of the city."

Simon rose, went to the table, downed another shot, and poured one for Eva. “Of course the water must have washed out the cabin too, and killed my parents, but I didn’t know for sure. I wanted to go home, but there no way to get there. I figured my best chance for survival was to go where there were no people, so I did the only thing I could: I took Anthony’s father’s canoe from behind the house and went to where the water was deepest.”

A charred log broke and fell, the flames flickering and sparking, and Simon took a fresh one from the stack beside the fireplace and placed it on the fire. “We all have bad memories from over there,” he said. “But maybe sometime we have to face them to get to where we have to go.”

He looked at the black sky outside. “It’s getting late. I should go.”

“Do you have to leave already?”

“I think I should go.”

“It’s late. You can spend the night if you want. I have extra blankets, you could sleep here, beside the fire.”

He looked at her, firelight reflecting in her eyes, making them sparkle like crystal, and more than anything else he wanted to stay. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me. But I want to see you again.”

“I would really like that.”

“Okay then. I’ll come to see you, that’s a promise.”

She smiled. “I hope so.”

It was a cold, clear evening. The slight skiff of partially melted snow had formed a hard crust. He walked through the courtyard looking at the apartments with muffled candlelight behind their drawn curtains, where there were small families inside. He walked through the town



to its southern gate, and despite the brightness of the moon and stars, the streets were barren. The only sound he heard was a low rumble as he passed the bar, the omnipresent growl of men drinking.

## 14. Cheenavala

Simon and his father sat on the stone wall that edged the boardwalk, watching the cheenavala, the Chinese fishing nets. The large contraptions, their wooden frames resembling spider's legs holding inverted nets, worked on a cantilever principal, so that a series of ropes and pulleys dropped the nets into the water, raising them after several minutes with a handful of fish (if the fishermen were lucky) caught in the net. The cheenavala were most active at high tide, when the waters of the Arabian Sea brought the fish closest to shore. Like many things in India, it took four men to operate a single cheenavala.

Max Gray had his elbows on his knees, hands folded. The sun was setting into the ocean and shone through his thin cotton shirt, revealing the outline of his skinny build. His arms were tough, though, sinewy like ropes, and his skin permanently brown from the thirteen years he'd spent in South India.

"Do you know why we came here, to Kochi?" he asked, not taking his eyes from the fishing nets and the sea.

Simon looked at his father, noticing the grime on his arms, the filth embedded into the lines and creases in his hands, the same way Simon's own hands looked. "To escape the west," Simon answered.

"That's right, but why?"

"Because you and mom wanted a simpler life."

Max turned to Simon. "Your mother and I moved here because we wanted to get away from all the things we hated about the west: materialism, money, pop culture. We wanted to live somewhere where that stuff didn't matter, and we wanted to raise you in a place where you'd be free to be your own person. So we moved to Kochi, bought land, and built a farm. We had

enough money to buy the land without having to borrow, which is impossible to do in the west, unless you're rich. This was important to us, being self-sufficient, not owing anything to anyone.

Do you understand this?"

"Yes."

"But you don't agree with it?"

Simon shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't like hard work?"

"It's not that."

Max looked at Simon for a long moment, his eyes held a permanent squint from a lifetime working outside. "We have enough to take care of ourselves. We grow our own food, and what we don't need we sell at the market to buy the things we need. We may not be rich, but we're free in a way that you don't yet understand."

"But we're westerners. The Indians think we're crazy, leaving Canada to work a farm like poor Shudras."

"Is that what your friend Filip tells you when you two are panhandling tourists on the boardwalk?"

Simon looked away from his father. "The tourists have lots of money."

"That doesn't matter. Money doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is food and shelter, the rest is just noise. How many times have I told you this?"

"Lots of times, Dad."

Max shook his head. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. Do you know how worried your mother is? Coming home after dark, with American dollars in your pockets. Is it just panhandling, Simon?"

“Yes.”

“And what will you do with the money?”

“Buy things.”

“I see. Things. I won’t even ask you what things, because it doesn’t matter. One day you’ll realize that things are only things. You’re thirteen now, and you’re beginning to see the world through the eyes of an adult, even though you have no idea what being an adult means. But you’re still my son, and you live under my roof. Stay away from Filip. He’s bad and will get you into serious trouble. If its money you want, then tomorrow I’ll take you to look for a job. My son is not going to be panhandling tourists, is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then.”

The cheenavala nearest to them dipped into the ocean, the men walking the wooden arms like spiders.

“These fishermen here are as poor as anyone in Kochi, but I admire them because they’re able to take from the land. If the world drastically changed tomorrow, it’s not the rich tourists who would survive, but these fishermen. A man is not truly free until he can provide for his family with his own two hands, remember that.

“When I was growing up we spent a lot of time at our cabin north of the city, where my father taught me how to hunt and fish. Maybe that’s why I’m drawn to these fishermen. It’s the only thing I miss about Canada—the wilderness. Nothing in India comes close the open spaces there. One day I’ll take you, and show you everything my father showed me. Would you like to do that?”

“Of course, Dad.”

“Good,” Max said. “Then we’ll go.”

They watched the sun go down and the tide go out and the fishermen slowly packing up their nets and catch, heading home to their families in the pastel evening.

Max and Simon rode their motorcycle back to the family farm outside Kochi. They turned onto the driveway, and the light from their house was the only one for miles around. His mother was sitting on the porch, reading Krishnamurti. Max gave her a long hug before he walked into the house. The family would go to bed early tonight, as there would be lots of work to do tomorrow, preparing their produce for Saturday’s busy market.

Simon looked at his mother on the porch, the book in her hand. She was always reading. The right books, she always said, provided a better education than any school could ever give, and as though in proof of that, she homeschooled Simon his entire life. She taught him to read with books by authors like Walter M. Miller Jr., Tom Robbins, and various eastern philosophers and astrologers. She taught him history and geography, and everything about land cultivation. But he learned math working their booth at the Kochi market where he had a chemistry with the tourists that his parents marveled at.

Jane wore a long, red, Indian-style cotton skirt, and her feet were bare. Even in the evening, the heat of Kerala could be unbearable. She motioned to the chair beside her.

“Filip steals for the Indian gangsters,” she said. “Did you know that? The ones that run drugs for the Russians. I don’t think you should be getting mixed up with him. These are things your father won’t speak to you about because you’re only thirteen. But I will, precisely because you are thirteen, and because I think I understand you a little better. You’re just like me, Simon, you’ve always been. But your father is your father; he’s never been a man of many words. He speaks in actions. Those fishermen that work the cheenavala, he sees more truth in them than in

anything else in this world, that's why he brings you there. We used to be safe from the influence of the western world here, but now the tourists and the drugs, the gangsters. The west is finding us again."

Jane looked beyond the porch, her hair wild and crows-feet at her eyes. She was young, beautiful, and old to Simon all at once. "Your father and I never fit in back home. We grew up like normal kids, went to university, did what was expected of us, and ended up working good jobs we didn't believe in. Your father in business, me the elementary school teacher. We bought a house, made friends, had dinner parties, bought things. We were always buying things. We would laugh at the young people our age who drove expensive cars that we knew they couldn't afford, our friends who owed more money than they made in a year. But that's the way it is there. Success is determined by what you own. Inevitably, we began to feel unfulfilled. Soon we found ourselves turning off the television, turning off the radio to escape the advertisements and the mindless programming. At night we would read and listen to great composers, talk about a life of simplicity. We found ourselves hating our jobs, hating our things, drifting from all of our friends, our colleagues, everyone we knew because they didn't understand."

"Didn't understand what?"

"That they, we, everyone, are just cogs in a machine. When we tried to explain this our friends pulled away, too comfortable in their lives to open their eyes. We would have dinner parties and they'd call us crazy, pretending they were joking, but we could see the truth in their words. You see, most people in the west think they live in the freest land in the world. They think they can do anything they want, and conceivably, they can. But what they don't understand is that what they think they want is really not their idea at all. A young man wants to be a lawyer, but why? Is it because he loves the law? Does he want to help people who are in trouble? Or is it

because he watches television shows that glorify lawyers? Or because lawyers make lots of money and have lots of power. How does the man know where this idea comes from? He doesn't. But worse than this he doesn't even think about it. He believes the idea is his own. The idea that you are free to do whatever you want is true, but most people let television, their parents, and their friends tell them what they want, and they don't even know this is occurring. This is why everyone wants to be lawyers in a land where they tell you that you are free to do whatever you please. And most often, people want to be what will make them the most money, so they can buy more things. This reality made us sick. We called it the Big Lie. Then one day, your father came home and told me he quit his job. He just couldn't do it anymore. He said all he wanted was a place to grow his own food and live independently, without having to worry about what anyone else said or did, or how he looked in their eyes. This was when I loved your father more than I ever had before. I saw how passionate he was, that he was willing to go all the way to quit that place we didn't believe in. He said to me, 'We can sell the house and with the money we can buy ten acres in India and build a farm. We will owe nothing to anybody. We will serve nobody. I can understand if you will not go with me, and I will not be angry with you, but I must go.' I kissed him. I told him that his dream was my dream, that my friends as well had drifted away, that I also did not fit in, that of course I would go. And we did."

Simon was quiet. He had heard this many times before, though never in so much detail.

"So you can understand why your begging makes your father and I so upset. It's not what we want for you. Money is not what we want for you. But you are growing up, and you will experiment, just please remember who you are. The most important thing is for you to feel fulfilled as an individual. Find the one thing that makes you happy beyond anything else, and pursue it relentlessly. Never let anyone tell you that you can't do it. And most importantly, make

sure this idea comes from within you and nowhere else. This is the hardest part, because the older you get, the more influence you will gather from the outside world. Know yourself, do not be swayed.” She looked at Simon for along moment, and then said, “I finished your reading today. It’s a simple message: you, the Gemini, will always be between two things. In your life, you will know your destiny in the pit of your stomach, like you know who your parents are. But you will confuse this path with another, and you will have the potential to be hopelessly torn between two things, or else follow the wrong path entirely. You must learn to be one thing only. One thing only and without compromise. That is the way to happiness.”

The big ship was far out to sea. Simon could just make out its silhouette on the horizon, three big stacks puffing smoke into endless blue. It was an oil tanker from the Gulf of Oman, heading south around the tip of India and from there South Asia, or possibly Australia. The big ships were a daily sight in the Arabian Sea, which was a main shipping route for Middle Eastern oil. For years, Simon had watched these ships, hoping that one would find its way into Kochi so that he could see how big it really was, and maybe, stow away and travel to a distant city in the west where things really happened. For Simon was thirteen, nearly a man he figured, and the world beyond Kochi was what really excited him now.

“Simon!” a voice yelled. “Simon!”

Simon turned to see his friend Filip running along the boardwalk. The tide was coming in, which meant the fishermen who worked the cheenavala were arriving. With the fishermen came the tourists, and that’s what had Filip so excited. Filip was a Goan boy the same age as Simon. He had the small facial features of the Anglo-Indian, but his long hair was jet black, and his skin was the dark brown, almost black, of the Shudra. He wore no shirt, and his thin, dark



body stood out on the bleached wood of the boardwalk. He stopped in front Simon, panting from his run.

“Four English tourists,” he said in good English, a skill he’d picked up panhandling on the fishnet promenade since he could walk.

“Where?” Simon asked in Malayalam, for he could speak the local dialect well, and often the two would carry on conversations going back and forth between English and Malayalam so that they could both improve their languages.

“Where the market stalls begin. A family, rich-looking. They will be easy targets. How do you feel?” Filip smiled brightly, and Simon knew what he meant. For months they had worked the fishnet promenade in tandem, one distracting the tourist while the other picked his pocket. It has always been Filip who did the stealing, partly because they found that Simon, a Caucasian panhandling and speaking Malayalam was more of a cultural oddity and therefore more of a distraction than Filip, but also because Simon’s pick-pocketing skills were not yet honed to perfection. But Filip had been teaching Simon, and was anxious for him to try what he’d learned.

“C’mon,” Filip said, “You have to break your cherry sometime. Are you afraid that you are slower than the fat tourists?”

Simon didn’t feel ready, but he wanted to show Filip that he was unafraid. “No,” he said. “I’m not afraid.” He jumped off the boardwalk, disappearing into the market stalls lining its edge.

He walked down the dirt path between two rows of stalls that ran parallel to the boardwalk. They glittered with everything from pashminas to clothing to wood animal carvings, fully stocked for the tourist rush. Every few metres was a gap to the boardwalk and the

cheenavala, and Simon watched for the English tourists in the crowds of passing people. He saw the children first, blond-haired and running ahead of the parents, and slipped between two stalls, waiting for the parents to pass. When they walked by, Simon saw that they were young and fit and worried that he might not be able to outrun the father if things went bad. But they were so distracted by the cheenavala, the vendors, and their children that Simon felt confident.

He hopped onto the boardwalk and set his pace a bit quicker than the mark's, as Filip had taught him. He studied the father, looking for the bulge of a wallet in the back of his Bermuda shorts, and smiled when he saw it on the right side, only a single-button clasp. Further down the boardwalk he made out Filip sitting cross-legged, his grey poor boy hat upside-down in front of him. Simon quickened his pace so that he'd reach the mark just as Filip was asking for money. This was the hardest part—being invisible. The children ran past Filip to look at the cheenavala directly behind him, and as the parents yelled and the mother stepped past Filip to admonish them, Filip held out his hat to the father, looked up with his best depressed, yet hopeful expression and asked, "One rupee, Sir?"

The family mustn't have been in India long, because the man stopped and smiled, and right there Simon knew they had him, for the one thing the Indian scam-artist loves above all else is the newly arrived tourist, for his pockets are deep and his senses are dull, he hasn't yet experienced the depth of corruption in the great country, which is, in fact, one scam after another after another. If Simon and Filip didn't get his money, the hotel manager, or the taxi driver, or the policeman would have. He reached into his front pocket and pulled out three one rupee coins, bent over and dropped them into Filip's hat, careful not to touch the boy or the hat, but smiling nonetheless, happy to help. And when he was bent over Simon passed behind, and in a single, fluid motion, unbuttoned the back pocket, pulled out the wallet and kept walking. He slipped the

wallet into his own front pocket, stepped off the boardwalk, and disappeared into the crowd of market stalls.

On the hill behind The St. Petersburg Restaurant, Simon opened the wallet and counted two thousand three hundred rupees, a good haul. He divided it into two piles and waited for Filip, happy to find the wallet full of rupees rather than American dollars, which were difficult for a boy to exchange. He flipped through the wallet, looking at the man's photos. They were mostly of his family, taken at their home and other places around the English city they had come from, and for a second, Simon felt bad about robbing him.

From the hill, Simon could just make out the top of a single cheenavala beyond The St. Petersburg. Soon a fisherman would come walking along the wooden frame like a spider, his weight counter-balancing the net into the water. Simon watched in awe not because of how the fisherman ran the cheenavala, but because he knew the fisherman made barely enough money to feed his family. The money Simon had stolen from the English tourist was more than the fisherman would make in months, maybe even a year. Simon saw the head and shoulders of a fisherman as he walked along the frame, before it dropped into the ocean and disappeared from view. Simon knew his parents also made barely enough money to survive. To Simon, they were like the fishermen, merely scraping by, and he couldn't understand why they chose to live like this. They had a choice; the fishermen didn't. Simon wanted his parents to be like the rich tourists from western cities who visited India to see the architecture and the orange-clad Sadhus, or the like Russian gangsters who owned the restaurants and hotels and threw money around like it was going out of style. These people would never aspire to become like the Indians, and neither did Simon.

From early on, Simon knew he liked money. He liked how the tourists had so much of it they could buy whatever they wanted. He liked how two minutes of work on the boardwalk netted him more than his parents made in a month. And the older he got, the more he drifted from his parents and their beliefs. He spent most days away from the farm, in the city with Filip, returning home only after the sun went down, like a hungry dog. Because despite what his parents told him, he believed that money was the root of happiness, the way to truly be somebody, and he hoped that one day he would have enough of it to walk the promenade with his head high like the rich tourists and the Russian gangsters.

## 15. Commotion

Anton was stunned by the variety of food in the tunnel market, the breadth of Frank Baxter's food empire. Vegetables and fruit lined the market stalls, and although he'd heard about the vast gardens and greenhouses near the outskirts of South Town, if Anton had dropped into town without history or knowledge, he would've thought that idea that such a place could exist inconceivable.

The market, however, wasn't the depiction of communal bliss an outsider might presume it to be. This was no euphoric tribe working and smiling together in a sunny landscape of plenty. Despite the abundance, the people in the market looked despondent, the talk between vendors and buyers reduced to curt, necessary dialogues. There was so much here and so little everywhere else; yet nobody was smiling.

It was Baxter, of course, who had this effect on the people. There was a time not so long ago when they loved him as a hero, but as most of them shifted from haves to have nots, the consensus regarding Frank Baxter had shifted as well. For too long now, the people had been surrounded by riches that were out of their reach, forced into cruel debt just to feed their families, and finally they were beginning to show signs of breaking. Anton felt the frustration around him, saw the people's resentment in looks and body language. He felt them shutting up in his presence, answering his queries with monosyllables, as mute as if he were one of Baxter's men. He understood that a violent man projects a certain energy, a negatively charged ion in a world of positives, and these people thought he was a bad man. And in a way he was, in a way they had it very right.

Anton noticed a growing lineup as he walked through the market, where a carter and his helper were unloading a shipment of fresh apples into a vendor's bin. The bright, red apples were just about the most appealing sight Anton had ever laid his eyes on, and he got in line.

He saw two men approaching from further down the tunnel. They walked a straight path, and as they got closer Anton could make out their dirty clothes and long, greasy hair. The people seemed afraid, giving the two men a wide berth. Anton assumed they belonged to Baxter these kind of men, who could afford to take pride in their appearance, but preferred to stink and look unkempt, as though the blackness of their souls could be worn like clothing.

When they spotted the fruit, they approached like surly bears, men accustomed to taking what they wanted.

As they pushed their way to the front of the line, one of the men bumped Anton's shoulder. The vendor was already digging in the bin and pulling out the nicest-looking of the bunch, trying to defuse any confrontation before it began.

Anton could have left it alone. His brother, who'd never approved of Anton's temper, would have told him to leave it alone. The men would've gotten their fruit, Anton his, and the world would've gone on just fine. Who was Anton to change anything? He was just a visitor here, and his fight wasn't with these men, but with Frank Baxter. But Anton was restless, holed up in that condo for too long, and fact was, these men *were* Baxter. They were everything he stood for, his vision incarnate. Anton stared at their backs, smelling the stink they'd left in their wake, feeling where one had bumped his shoulder as if they were still touching. He looked at the poor people around him who had nothing, but respected each other enough to form a line and wait their turn. These men respected nothing.

Anton's anger grew, pressure building in his chest, like flame seeking oxygen, making his face flush, turning his eyes and ears hot and blood-filled. His peripheral vision disappeared, and sounds morphed together into one long drawl, as if he were underwater. This was how it happened with Anton. Now he couldn't control it.

Beside the vendor's table was a pushcart with a broken axle. The cart was propped up on a piece of wood, the thin, steel piping broken completely off one wheel and coming off the other, loose enough to pull away.

Anton left the line, pried the pipe loose, stuck the two-foot piece of steel through a loop in the back of his jeans, and walked over to the two men now at the front of the line stuffing apples into their pockets, and eating like animals, mouths and fingers glistening from the sticky juice. Anton wanted to hurt them.

The vendor watched Anton approach, his eyes widening, and the men, seeing the vendor's reaction, turned to look at Anton. Most of the people in the line dispersed uneasily, while others stayed to watch, forming a rough circle around Anton and the two men.

Anton looked at one who'd brushed his shoulder, the bigger of the two, with his mess of black, oily hair, lopsided beard, and a raggedy and sun-bleached black suit coat. A rusty machete was stuck in the front of his belt.

"Watch where you're going," Anton said calmly, as though he was mentioning this in passing, a second thought. But the look in his eyes betrayed his tone, and spoke of a violence so intense it was hard to imagine it contained under mere flesh, in the guise of something that resembled a man, as though Anton wasn't human at all but a physical materialization of rage itself, the emotion broken down to its basest and most liquid form.

The bigger man's eyes blinked erratically. He scowled. He looked at the vendor and the other people backing away, and dropped the apple from his hand. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I hate lineups," Anton said, a slight Spanish accent. "Make people crazy. All this for a few apples. But they look good. Are they as good as they look?"

The man twitched, and for a moment—less than a second—his eyes betrayed his fear. Then, Anton knew he had him, both of them, because Anton wasn't afraid. He couldn't remember the last time he was afraid of anything, but he recognized fear in others, no matter how hard they tried to hide it, as if it were a neon glow seeping from their pores. It used to surprise him when men who appeared the toughest were the ones who were about three seconds away from pissing in their pants, but it didn't surprise him anymore. He had learned that predatory humans fell into one of two categories: those who are truly bad and those who were cowards. A truly bad person would do what others weren't willing to do. A coward wanted to be that way, but lacked the guts. He needed reassurance, and sought out others of his ilk to feel stronger. And when two cowards came together, they fed off each other, one adding strength where the other was weak. They became like jackals, nipping at heels, pushing one another to take the action a bit farther. Cowards went through life striving to be something they knew they weren't, and hated themselves as a result. It was that hatred turned outwards that made them dangerous when together. But hurt one, fuck one up really bad, and they'd scatter, every time.

The big man laughed, nervously at first, then his friend joined in and they were both laughing, trying hard to make their fear go away. The crowd seemed relieved, relaxing a bit, because even though they hated Baxter and these men who represented him, in fifteen years nobody had ever openly challenged him. In their dreams, it was always one of their own taking a



stand, one of the people, never an outsider. But the people should have known that nothing ever happened the way they imagined it would.

Anton didn't laugh, and didn't move. He just stared at the man who'd bumped his shoulder.

When they stopped laughing, the man spoke. "Do you know who the fuck we are?"

"I don't care," Anton said.

"Who are you?" the big man asked.

"I am nobody."

"You with Fisher? He ain't gonna like this, you comin down here to our market. What the fuck you tryin' to do?"

"I'm not with Fisher."

"Then who are you?"

Anton didn't answer. The man's hand moved from his side, closer to the machete. "I said who are you?"

Anton let his own hand slip behind his back and grip the pipe, the cold steel.

The man's face twitched again, his eyes wide and fearful, and desperate. "Don't make me mess you up," he said, trying hard to stare down Anton, but Anton stared back and the man looked away to stare at the ground. Anton knew the man wanted violence, but was too afraid to make the move. Then, something clicked in the man's brain as his head turned slightly to his friend, and he seemed to remember that there were two of them, and that people were watching. His right hand shook as it inched closer to the machete, stopping about an inch from the handle, his thumb touching the top of his belt, fingers spread wide across his hip. He lifted his chin, looked at Anton, and with a quick, frantic movement, went for the machete.

But the pipe was already out.

One swing from high above and Anton brought it down like a boulder falling from the sky. A flash of charcoal gray, a sickening crack, and bone, skin and cartilage broke, blood spraying the fruit. The man fell like a bag of apples.

The other man went for his gun, and Anton broke his hand with the pipe, then smashed his knee. The man crumpled beside his friend, hands in front of his face, pleading, “Don’t do it. Please, don’t kill me.”

Then it was Anton’s turn to laugh, but he didn’t. He just stood with the pipe, his rage partially dispelled by the violence, but not all of it, never all of it. “Give me the gun,” he said, and the man did, with his unbroken hand. “Give me your money,” Anton said, and the man obeyed, digging coins out of his pocket, and handing them over.

Anton dropped the coins on the vendor’s table. “Take what they owe you,” he said. “And give the rest to these people.” He reached into the bin, took two apples, and paid with a half coin from his own pocket. When he walked through the crowd, it parted, the same as it had earlier for the two men.

The tunnel market was a vacuum, soundless, motionless. The people watched Anton walk to the end of the tunnel, to where it curved left and opened onto the plaza. Anton took his time as he turned the corner, looking for a long moment at the main façade of the cathedral, before disappearing down the western road, the one that led to Frank Baxter.

## 16. Wake-Up Call

The sound from the oak door echoed down Simon's brief hallway. It was a deep, heavy boom, a big fist on solid wood. Nothing like the uncoiled, metallic sound made by the steel knocker, the one Simon preferred, that he connected with the time from before. There was something light and free, as unoppressive as the other was foreboding, the two knocks so opposite in texture and insinuation they could hardly be called the same thing, or seek the same end.

In all his years in South Town, Simon had had only a handful of visitors, but none of them had ever used the knocker.

It was dark outside, about an hour until dawn, when Simon sat up, half-asleep. He reached for his gun under the couch, staring at the door, thinking it would be kicked open at any moment. Then, his memory came back to him. It had been three days since his meeting with Frank Baxter; this was Travis Parker at the door.

Another knock, heavier.

"I'm coming," Simon called.

He put on the blue jeans folded on the floor beside his bed, tucking his gun into the waistband at the back, and stepped quietly across the room in his bare feet.

Travis was dressed tidily in a shirt and jacket, hair impeccably parted, hands folded as if he was at a funeral. There was another man too, much bigger than Travis. He had a buzz cut and a large nose that was pockmarked and bent to the side, broken a long time ago and never fixed. Simon sized him up, figuring he was at least two-fifty, betting he was the one who'd done the knocking.

"You're not ready," Travis said, stepping uninvited into the apartment.

“You said dawn; give me a few minutes. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Dan.”

Simon went to the old oak dresser across the room, and took his last clean t-shirt from the top drawer. Its scent reminded him of Eva and her apartment, the soap she kept in her bathroom. He packed a few things into a small black backpack, glancing at Travis and Dan standing a few feet from his stash under the floorboards. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the couch.

“We’re fine,” Travis said.

Simon shrugged, and slipped the t-shirt over his head. “Suit yourself.”

Simon didn’t like having people in his home, especially Frank’s men. The person Simon was in Frank Baxter’s world was different from the one who lived in this apartment. Travis Parker didn’t understand this. Travis, to be sure, probably never made such distinctions in his own life, so the concept would be alien to him. Simon was once the same way, back before he realized the necessity of keeping his two lives separate. Now this division, the ability to step between worlds, was one of the few things that sustained him. Back when Harry still liked to venture outside his cathedral room, he would visit Simon at home. They’d discuss business and share a few drinks, sometimes talking about who they were before, and who they figured they were now. Simon had enjoyed their conversations, but found it difficult to distinguish between the job and his home life. Eventually, Harry’s visits began to fall off, and the isolation was a godsend to Simon. He kept to himself, and kept the bad things he did out on the streets of South Town. His other life he would now save just for Eva, drive a spike between his two selves, protecting one from the other, and her from the worst of him.

Simon looked at Dan standing by the doorway—Travis’s muscle there just to shake Simon up, make sure he had no second thoughts about the job. He was wearing a nice suit like

Travis's, but it was wrinkled and too small, and Simon wanted to laugh. "I told you, I told Frank: I work best alone," Simon said.

"You'll do the job alone," Travis said. "But I have to get you there in one piece."

Simon knew the way Frank wanted the job done wasn't the way Travis wanted it done. Travis Parker ran things hard, liked making examples. He'd brought Dan in case things went off plan, or if Simon needed some convincing. And if Simon failed, Travis would like nothing better than to do things his own way.

"Just give me the space I need when the time comes," Simon said.

"What's your plan?" Travis asked.

"Not much of one, really."

"Tell me," Travis said. He took a cigarette from a metal case in his shirt pocket, fishing around for a light, unable to find one.

"I'm going to where the old man told me the courier would cross the wall into North Town. I'll find a good spot to dig in until he comes by, and once I've made him, I'll follow him into town, and lift it from him in the market."

Travis managed to find the Zippo in his inside pocket, lit his smoke, and took a long drag. "That's it? That's what we get from the smart kid? It's too simple."

"Simple's not bad."

"You don't think he'll notice?"

"No, he won't notice."

"What about the weight?"

Simon took a rectangular, flat piece of metal edged with plastic and colourful wires from his backpack, and handed it to Travis.

Travis studied the obsolete piece of technology, handling it like a piece of fruit, turning it over in his hands, running his fingers along the smooth metal and rough computer chips. Then he smiled, eyes lighting up, betraying for the first time since they met any sort of emotion at all.

“You’re going to switch them. Where’d you get it?”

“This stuff’s in just about every abandoned house from here to North Town. You just need to know what you’re looking for. I never thought I’d be stealing computer parts, but here we are.”

Simon wondered what was on the hard drive that Frank wanted so badly. Without power, a purpose, or the internet, computers were meaningless. Simon’s father had considered them flawed extensions of the human brain, inaccessible once shut down for good. When a person dies, his father would say, the information in his mind is lost forever. What will happen when the computers go the same way? He encouraged Simon to learn from books, taught him to do things with his hands. Real skills, he once said, can never be taken away.

“What if they’re not the same?” Travis asked.

“They just have to be the same size and weight. If I do it right, the courier will never know what happened.”

“Until he gets it to Fisher.”

“Until Fisher tries to use it.”

Travis thought for a moment. “They’ll connect you,” he said.

“No they won’t. During the day, the market’s busy; he’ll never even notice me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s what I do.”

“But they’ll know it was Frank.”

“They might wonder, but they won’t know for sure because Frank doesn’t operate this way. The job will seem out of character for him, another reason for Fisher to suspect someone else.”

Travis shook his head. “We should just kill him in the outskirts, take it from him.”

“That would be easiest, but I see why Frank wants it done this way. He’s always been obvious. This will confuse Fisher, and buy Frank some time.”

“You’ll be exposed,” Travis said.

“Only if I make a mistake, but then it won’t matter anyway. If he makes me behind the wall, I’m as good as dead. That’s why your boss is going to double my pay.”

Travis watched Simon finish packing his bag. “You better be as good as Frank thinks you are,” he said, leading them out the door. “Because we won’t have another chance at this.”

## 17. Loner

They headed north on River Road in the cool morning air. Conifers and lean, white birch trees edged the road's left side. Metallic-looking waves crested a crumbling break-wall, spilling onto the road. Across the river, the green and gray buildings of the old city stood out on a backdrop of pastel morning sky.

It was Simon's third time in as many days walking the twenty kilometres, but he felt good, and strong. Simon looked back at Dan, whose bare head glistened with sweat, and thought he might keel over at any moment. Travis was in better shape, walking like a soldier who could go forever, the type of man who'd never admit weakness.

Simon remembered what it was like in the city after the river had finally receded. The water had planed the landscape like a glacier, scattering the debris of a sprawling metropolis. He remembered the black, mud streets that smelled like spring, the rats. The gangs emerged as the city dried, and once again Simon knew he had to go where there were fewer people. He'd crossed the two-kilometer wide expanse of water on a makeshift raft, the current carrying him far downstream to the banks of South Town where, unbeknownst to Simon, Frank Baxter's men were posted along the river's edge, killing those who tried to come ashore.

Travis was looking at the dilapidated buildings across the river. "You came from the city?" he asked.

"Didn't everyone?"

"Most, the ones we didn't shoot in the river. I remember you on the shore, working for us. You were just a kid then. How many men did you kill?"

Travis was grinning, eyes lit up with grim nostalgia. So he remembered Simon. Simon had never forgotten Travis, Frank Baxter's right hand who'd led the men of South Town against



the onslaught from the city. Simon was lucky to make it across, and then followed their orders lest he give them an excuse to turn on him too. True, most of the people trying to cross were bad men, criminals, the ones who survived the flood. But there were others. There were families. Frank said if they let one across, there'd be no stopping the rest. He told the men they'd thank him in the end. Simon had played the part well enough, but he'd never killed anyone. There were some men in the city, before he'd crossed the river, but he never knew for certain if they were dead.

"We shouldn't talk here," Simon said. "We'll draw too much attention."

"That many," Travis said, still grinning.

Simon led the way down the old single-lane highway. The frost had melted, leaving wet the rotten leaves, gravel, and asphalt. He tried to listen for any sound of danger, the way he did when he walked this road alone, but could hear only Travis and Dan's heavy steps and breathing. They were too loud for the outskirts; Simon hoped they'd make it to North Town in one piece.

Dan's pace began to slow, and he wavered on his feet, out of breath. "Wait," he gasped. "I need a minute to rest." And before Simon could object, Dan knelt in the middle of the road.

"Not here," Simon said. "A few hundred yards up the road there's a clearing. You can rest there." Simon knew that loners seldom had guns. And if they did have one, they rarely had the bullets to go with it, because bullets were made in the towns and carried a hefty price. But that didn't stop the loners. They liked to set up ambushes in tight spots like the narrow part of the road the trio were on now. They used speed, attacking with whatever they could get their hands on. Simon looked at Travis, then watched the trail behind them.

"He's right. Get up," Travis ordered, glaring at Dan.

Dan reached out to steady his weight, getting one wobbly leg up, then the other, finally standing, sweat dripping from his chin to the road. His clothes were damp and rumpled, and he loosened his tie, clawing at the fabric as if it was strangling him. "Alright," Dan said. "I'm up."

Simon turned and resumed walking, but when he looked up he saw a man standing in the middle of the road about thirty feet away. The man had come out of nowhere, materialized while they were distracted by Dan. He had long hair and a skinny frame draped in tattered clothes that hung like a scarecrow's. The man didn't move, just stood silently, and Simon got the feeling he'd been following them for a while, from just inside the tree line.

"Heads up," Simon said over his shoulder.

The man had ravenous, wild eyes that didn't blink, fixed only on them, tunnel-vision. The muscles in his neck and shoulders tensed, as if he was about to lunge at them. Then, just as quickly, he managed a broken-toothed smile, and stretched out a dirty hand. "Please give me food," he said.

Travis pulled his gun. "I don't think so."

The man winced, got down on his knees. "Please," he said. "I just want something to eat. I'm starving, I have nothing."

Travis walked towards him and pressed the barrel of his gun to the man's forehead. The man shook, let out a cry, wept into the mess of stringy hair hiding his face. "Just one piece of bread," he pleaded, "and I'll disappear, you'll never see me again."

Simon didn't like the scene. He scanned the tree line for movement. "Dan, watch back the way we came. He's trying to fuck us."

Travis's eyes widened, his jaw clenched tight, the muscles of his cheeks fluttering. He looked now like the madman Simon remembered from this very river bank years ago, as he

pushed his gun hard into the scarecrow's temple. "That right? You tryin' to fuck us? Look at me."

The scarecrow looked up. "Please, I have nothing." He opened his eyes, tears streaming.

There was a flash of movement from the tree line, too late by the time Simon saw it, and a rock flew from the bush, striking Dan on the side of the head. He fell in the road, unconscious, and the scarecrow dodged to the side just as Travis pulled the trigger. The bullet hit asphalt, and the scarecrow went for the gun.

Simon felt a bony forearm at his throat, saw an elbow off to his right. A knife glinted in the sun. Simon grabbed his assailant's wrist just before the blade stuck his neck. He couldn't breathe; the arm was crushing his larynx, felt like something was going to pop. The man meant to kill him quick. Simon reached fast for his gun, shifted his balance, aimed where the he figured man's head ought to be, and pulled the trigger. The barrel was right beside his ear, the sound deafening, but the man's arm went slack, his body crumpled.

Simon gasped for breath that seemed as if it would never come. The back of his head and neck was wet with the other man's blood. Dazed and weary, he fought the urge to pass out, an inky darkness hovering in the periphery of his vision.

Travis yelled; he was still fighting the scarecrow.

Simon stumbled forward, one hand on his throat and the other holding his gun. He raised it and shot into the asphalt near their feet, then aimed at the scarecrow's head. The scarecrow relaxed, raised his arms, and let Travis take his gun from him. His wild eyes softened, and he was about to say something, beg for his life probably, but Travis pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot rippled across the river, and somewhere nearby, a bird fluttered in a burst of short flight. Then it was very quiet.

Simon looked at the man on the ground, red on his tattered shirt. The bloody spot grew, seeping down the side of his ribcage in a lazy stream, like oil from a can.

The shot must have startled Dan. He sat up, holding his head, blood running down his face, and dripping off his chin. He looked at the bodies, then at Travis and Simon.

“Hide them in the bush,” Travis ordered, putting another round into his clip. “And if you stop again, the next one’s in your fucking head.”

## 18. The Courier

Simon lay on his belly on a gravel esker covered in earthy moss. He was well-hidden inside the tree line, with a clear view to the road and the gate. He'd spread out his black nylon raincoat on the soaking wet ground, which kept at least the top half of his body dry. The fronts of his thighs, however, were soaked through. Still, he was careful not to move, even to get the blood flowing to his freezing legs, as there is no sound in the bush more unnatural than the swish of nylon. Another hour on the ground and he would be shivering. He envied Travis and Dan waiting in Baxter's warm safe house in North Town.

The first large animal Simon had ever killed was a yearling bear when he was fourteen. There were many grouse and rabbit before that, but the bear was the real deal, what his father had called his initiation. They had set up a bait in a small clearing, and filled it with expired sweets and meat from the grocery store. A bear is a habitual creature, and once one finds a regular food source, it will return to that source almost every day. Simon waited from late afternoon until dark, lying on his belly behind a dirt mound up a small embankment thirty yards from the bait, .308 ready with a round in the chamber, the heady smell of rotting leaves in the air. All he had to do was lie perfectly still and wait for the bear to appear, and on the fourth day it did.

The animal made itself known with the snap and crash of brush as it walked in a large, slow circle around the bait, scenting the air. Because the bear made a lot of noise, Simon figured it was a large animal, and when it finally showed itself just after the sun went down, Simon was surprised to see that it was a small yearling. The bear carefully walked toward the bait, no doubt aware of its relative size, and stood on its hind legs to get at the can, which was tied to a small

jack pine. The bear's entire left side was clear to Simon as he looked through the scope, watching him feed.

Simon's heart pounded in his chest, he felt his pulse in his head, heard it in his ears. The bush was silent, but Simon's own blood flooded his head in great vociferous waves. His breathing turned fast and heavy, before he calmed himself down with a few deep breaths. He rested the rifle on the sandbag they'd brought for that purpose, snugging the butt against his shoulder. He put the crosshairs where the bear's heart and lungs ought to be, exhaled a long breath, and pulled the trigger.

The boom of the rifle was deafening in the still evening air, but to Simon it was just a muffle. The bear dropped instantly. With just a few kicks of its hind legs it was over. Simon loaded a fresh round into the chamber and waited a few minutes, as his father had taught him. When he was sure the animal was dead, he approached with the rifle at his hip, safety off.

The bear's tongue hung from its mouth and its eyes were open, but glassy. Simon touched the barrel to the nearest eye to be sure the bear was dead, and when he saw that it was, flicked on the safety and leaned the rifle against the jack pine. Simon could smell the bear's blood, metallic and strong, and feel its body heat radiating skyward. He sat on a log and waited for his father, who was hunting not ten kilometers away and would've heard the shot. This was Simon's first kill, and now his father would show him how to gut and carry the animal out of the bush.

Simon looked at the bear, amazed at its stillness, hardly believing that it had been living minutes ago, and that he himself had taken its life. He understood why they hunted, rather than bought their meat in a grocery store, but the kill was so easy. The bear was drawn to the stink of

rotting meat and sweets, and all Simon had to do was pull the trigger. The killing didn't feel honourable.

Later that night, after Simon and his father had carried the bear out of the bush and hung it from rafters in the shed behind the cabin, Simon told his father how he'd felt killing the bear. His father listened quietly, and after awhile said, "The taking of an animal's life is a serious matter. But you didn't shoot that bear because you felt like killing something, you shot it because its meat will feed our family for months. Every time I kill an animal I say a little prayer to the Gods, whoever they may be. But this is our meat, which we took from the bush. We know where it came from, how it was killed, and we know that it has no chemicals, hormones, or anything else. There is nothing healthier than this meat. Walk through the grocery store and try to tell yourself that same thing about anything wrapped in plastic. There's nothing wrong with a good, clean bush kill. And now you know how to provide for your family, really provide for them. That's a ton more than most boys your age."

The contact had told Simon that the courier, James, was a big guy with a scar and military training, who was otherwise unremarkable. Simon understood perfectly. He might as well have been waiting for himself, a man who made his living by keeping under the radar, stealing for money, for the men in charge. It was unfortunate they couldn't meet another way. Simon felt a connection to James, as if they were two generals meeting on the battle field, only one didn't know the attack was coming.

Simon admired Fisher's plan. To anybody watching, the courier would be just another man crossing the wall. There'd be no extravagant posse thundering into town, announcing to the world that something big was up. Like Baxter, Fisher had gone to great lengths to underplay the

device's importance, draw no attention to it, and Simon wondered if the courier even had any idea what he was carrying.

It was just after noon when Simon saw James. He was bigger than Simon had figured, and was wearing a green army greatcoat and black wool hat. As he got closer the scar became visible, as if something not quite sharp enough had ripped through the side of his face, from under his hat to his chin. Simon could see the relief on James's face, as though he were letting his guard down already. James had come from the city, crossed the river and the gate, and now the final road into North Town was the last of his worries. It was one of the reasons Simon picked this place for the job—that and its location close to the North Town market.

Simon saw the edge of the hard drive outlined along the bottom of James's canvas shoulder bag, and figured it was about the same size as the one in his pocket now. Not a smart place to carry the device, Simon thought. He'd have had it in an inside pocket, touching his ribs the whole way so he didn't have to think about it, and could instead stay alert to his surroundings. And if his pockets weren't big enough, he'd have sewn one that was. Not that Simon was complaining. He was glad to do the job his way, and if it went according to plan, he wouldn't have to get Travis and Dan involved at all.

Simon waited until James had passed and was further up the road before he came out of the bush, following from a short distance until they reached the market at the edge of town. It was Sunday, and just as in South Town, the market was busy. He followed James down the narrow street lined with tables and carts covered with food of all types, eyes trained on the back of his army greatcoat. James walked quickly, dodging the pushcarts and vendors, and Simon realized he would need to make his move soon, before they came out at the far end of the market. He set his pace for the exchange, and closed the gap.



The bag was hanging on James's right side. Simon would have preferred the left, since he was right-handed, but it didn't matter too much, he could manage with either hand. He watched the bag's movement on James's hip, swiveling back and forth like a pendulum, gauging the brief moment when it wasn't touching James at all, hanging in mid air, the tension on the strap gone slack. Simon timed his left arm to move in sync with the bag. The idea was to be meaningless, miniscule, a non-existent blip in the man's very long day. On a crowded street, a person never notices someone walking at his own speed; he notices the one going slower, or the one who seems to be in a rush. If they met each other tomorrow, if they were ever face to face, the courier shouldn't recognize Simon at all.

The bag had two canvas straps keeping it closed. Simon concerned himself with the one to the rear. Three paces behind James, Simon looked up to see the final market stalls about thirty feet away. There was one final lineup that they would need to cut through: that would be the place.

Simon got beside him now, just behind his peripheral vision, palming the fake in his hand. James's right leg went forward, the bag went slack, and Simon undid the strap with his thumb and forefinger. He waited another step; they were cutting through the line now, James pushing his way through the crowd with his arm held out in front of him, and while he was concentrating on being assertive, Simon smoothly, without fumbling, switched the hard drives.

James emerged on the other side while Simon doubled back into the crowd, walking to the market entrance without turning around. That was always the hardest part, not looking back. Sometimes he felt like a crack on the head would come at any moment, and it took all of his willpower not to look. But not today. Today he knew he was safe as soon as the job was done.

James hadn't noticed a thing. The whole exchange from when Simon entered the market to when he walked back out took less than thirty seconds.

## 19. Eva's Place

When he knocked on the door and looked into the peephole, almost immediately he could feel her on the other side, and sense her body heat like afternoon sun. He wondered if she'd thought about him the way he'd thought about her. He wondered what he looked like, if he'd remembered to shave this morning. The door opened and there she was, bare feet, her green eyes squinting a little.

"It's good to see you again," she said.

"I came as soon as I could."

"I never wanted you to leave the first time." She took him by the hand, pulled him into the apartment, and pressed her soft, moist mouth against his.

Her apartment was warm from the fire. Outside, the sky was turning dark. He walked to the window and peered at the courtyard below, feeling her eyes on him.

"I heard something terrible happened in the market the other day," she said. "A man killed another man over nothing. Hit him with a metal pipe and killed him, and then he just walked away, nobody stopped him."

"Where?"

"South Town. A friend told me. Her husband trades with the vendors there. He heard the man who was killed worked for Baxter, that he may have been drunk and causing trouble, but still, it scares me. To think that something like that could happen, and there's nothing we can do about it. Do you ever think of leaving," she asked.

"All the time," he said.

"I mean *really* think about it, like the way your parents left."

Simon turned from the window. She looked small and slight beside the fire, her knees pulled to her chest. “My parents left the west for India, because they wanted to live a simpler life. But we came back here when I was still young, and lived in a log cabin up north, a sturdy old house that my Dad inherited from his father. It used to be a few hours drive, a few days walk now. It’s remote up there, not many people then. I can’t even imagine what it would be like now. If I went anywhere, I’d go there.”

“That sounds nice,” she said. “Do you still know the way?”

“I’ll never forget.”

“What do you remember about it?”

“Certain things. The garden my parents kept, hunting moose and bear with my father, the deep snow in the winter. I remember that we were independent, lived completely off the grid, and my parents were proud of that. But my memories are fading. I can’t make them out clearly anymore. It’s like trying to remember a dream that’s slipping away with every moment you’re awake. And the longer I’m here, the more they fade. Sometimes I wonder what I’m holding on to, these images, these ideals from my childhood. How do I know they’re even real? It seems like the longer I live in South Town, the less I remember about what it means to be good, how to lead a good life. I feel like the lessons my parents taught me have no relevance here, and if I let them, I’d already be dead. Sometimes I want to leave just so I can remember what I used to be like, how I used to feel. I was always a person who stole, but I never took from somebody who couldn’t spare it, and I’ve never killed anybody. Not for sure.”

“Because you’re not like them.”

“But I feel like them,” he said.

“But you’re not.” Eva’s eyes were wide and intense and she touched his face softly as though her fingertips could pull the hesitation from him, make him concede.

“I wish life was simpler.”

“It can be whatever you want it to be. My father, I watched him for years. He’d go to work every morning with his briefcase, white shirt and colourful tie and came home every night, drank and yelled at my mother. He was so angry at being forced into something he didn’t believe in. I know he resented us, my mother and me. He had wanted to be an actor, was pretty good too, I guess. But once mom got pregnant with me, he had to put that on hold and get a job. Even as a child, I could recognize the root of his anger. Sometimes I think that when it all happened, he was even happy to be released from his boring life with us. It took me a few years, but I eventually realized that it wasn’t us that killed my father inside, it was the system that all these people look back on with teary eyes and want to relive. I hear them in the market, wishing for things to go back to the way they were. People only remember the good. I promised myself that I would never end up like my father. You look like him, you know. Your distance, the way you’re staring out the window now. My point, Simon, is that you should never be afraid of doing what you want to do, what you know inside to be the right thing to do, because you’ll only end up hating yourself, and everyone around you.”

“The cabin is farther north than anyone else has gone. Nobody knows what’s out there, how many loners there are.”

“Maybe nothing is out there; maybe there are no loners that way.”

“Or maybe it’s the worst possible thing you can imagine.”

“Anything is better than this. What kind of a way to live is this? I know you think you just need to stay on the right side of all the violence, but sooner or later you’ll need to decide,

because you aren't like them, and you can only pretend for so long that you are. Eventually, you won't be able to hide who you are anymore."

"I've done it for years."

"Because it was easier before. At the beginning when there wasn't any hope, they provided it, they made promises. It took a while to see the other side of those promises, but we do now. Or maybe we recognized the ugliness all along, and we just shut it out, refused to believe it because the alternatives were worse. But we all came from the other side of the river, and we gave something up when we came over here, letting them make the rules, which we abide by, and as long as the consequences don't touch us, we look the other way. But what happens when they do?"

"What happens if the north is worse?"

"It can't be worse."

Simon thought about Anthony and his family, and the men who had killed them with absolute indifference. People forgot too soon. "Yes it can," he said.

She sighed. "Well I would love to go, anywhere. Anywhere but here." She ran her fingers through his hair, kissed his neck softly, and her touch made him want to stay forever. He wished he could give her everything she wanted.

She turned into him, and he held her close, their faces warm from the heat of the fire. They watched sparks flicking high and then burning out, white ash floating like pollen, riding jets of hot air.

## 20. Dmitri

At the brink of monsoon season on a hot June night, Simon was walking through the back lot of the St. Petersburg restaurant when he spotted the owner, Dmitri Vilkovsky, in the dining area talking to a group of German tourists, the restaurant's only remaining customers.

Dmitri owned three restaurants on the fishnet promenade. They were colourful, touristy places with numerous servers and overpriced menus, and they embodied that quality that affluent tourists desired above all others: a sense of authenticity melded with the comfort of home. As a foreigner who came from a world of money (drug money, but money none the less), Dmitri clearly understood this need of the well-off, to travel without really travelling.

A diminutive young Russian with shaggy hair and a stubbled face, Dmitri had a predilection for surfer shorts, button-down shirts, and flip-flops, and to the tourists he was the quintessential foreigner-turned-local, the real expatriate. He walked through his dining rooms during peak times, meeting tourists and arranging guided tours in and around Kochi.

Like most restaurants in Kerala, the dining area of The St. Petersburg was in the open air, close to the ocean, under a big gazebo roof of thatched bamboo. The breeze coming off the Arabian Sea flowed easily through the dining area, cooling the patrons nearly as effectively as air-conditioning would have. During the hottest months, however, the small, claustrophobic kitchen sweltered, so the door that led to the back parking lot was usually wide open.

Dmitri paused at the register long enough to empty the till, then he walked to the kitchen, carrying what Simon assumed to be the day's cash deposit in a small, black bag. Instinctively, Simon hid behind the only car in the lot, Dmitri's black BMW, to see what the Russian would do next.

Once Dmitri entered the kitchen, the cooks cleared out without Dmitri having to say a word, an exodus that looked familiar and well-rehearsed. Dmitri looked around to ensure he was alone, scanning the back lot for a long time, even considering, Simon thought, closing the door, but he didn't. Instead, Dmitri went to the back of a big, old bulky fridge that looked like the front-end of a 1950 Ford Crestliner. Carefully, Dmitri pulled away the back panel, and hid the bag in the guts of the old fridge.

The next day Simon told Filip what he'd seen, and from the top of small hill behind the barrier wall that fenced in the back lot of The St. Petersburg, the boys began a steady reconnaissance. The hill, built up from years of monsoon flooding, was well hidden by palm trees, the perfect hiding place. In just a couple of days they watched Dmitri make multiple deposits, but never take anything out of the fridge. Nobody else even gave it a second glance, leading Simon to believe the only person who knew its secret was Dmitri.

It was well-known that Dmitri Vilkovsky was tied to the Russian mafia, and the thought of robbing a mafia-operated restaurant had never before crossed Simon's mind. It was a high-risk job, and as everybody in Kochi knew, only fools messed with the mafia. But to the boys it was partly a game, spying behind their wall like government agents, and the thought of getting caught seemed a remote possibility. Plus, they were getting tired of the pick-pocket scam they ran on the tourists. Most marks carried enough cash for the day, and the sums were beginning to seem small, whereas there, in the back of Dmitri's fridge, was the biggest score they'd ever seen.

Filip wanted to go in right away, figuring the job was as simple as it seemed. Simon was hesitant. He'd heard the stories of how the Russian gangsters solved their problems in South India, the bodies polluting the deep Kerala backwaters, the network of rivers and brackish canals



that wound their way to the heart of the Indian province. At Simon's insistence, the boys waited and watched, and all the while Filip's impatience grew.

On their third night behind the concrete wall, as they watched Dmitri go to the back of the fridge and hide the money, the same as he'd done on the previous nights, Filip said to Simon, "Let's do it tonight."

But Simon shook his head. "No. We need to wait longer, see what he does." And when Filip asked why, Simon answered, "Because we need to figure out his schedule, the day that Dmitri takes the money out."

"But then it will be gone."

"So we wait until he starts putting it back again, and steal it just before we know he's going to take it out."

"But it's there now," Filip persisted. "We could just take it." To this Simon just shook his head, not for the first time perplexed by his friend's stubbornness. He turned his attention back to the restaurant, hoping that Filip would concede and let Simon do things the right way. What Filip didn't know was that there was something else about the Russian gangster that had captivated Simon's imagination, fueling his desire to wait a little longer.

Dmitri and the other Russians walked the promenade like they owned it, and in some ways they did. It was no secret that the Russian mafia, recognizing an opportunity to turn cheap real estate into a tourist goldmine, was relentlessly buying up beachfront property. This land was mostly a front for the more lucrative drug trade that prospered in the popular tourist destination to the north known for its raves—Goa. With a foothold in both the real estate and the drug markets, the Russians were trying to corner the tourist dollars from all sides.

To Simon, these facts were infinitely more interesting, and represented more opportunity than simply stealing a week's cash deposit from a busy restaurant. As Simon watched Dmitri moving from table to table, talking up the smiling tourists who had absolutely no idea of the bigger picture, he wondered if there might be a better way to get Dmitri's attention. A plan began to take shape in his mind. What if, Simon wondered, he told Dmitri about the flaw in the collection process, how he'd been watching for nearly a week and could have robbed The St. Petersburg at any time. And while Dmitri absorbed this revelation, Simon would ask for a job. It was a risky play, but Simon was convinced he could pull it off, sure that Dmitri would recognize his potential. Simon knew the Russians were at odds with the local Indians, and to have a young westerner who knew Kochi's back streets by heart could be invaluable to Dmitri.

On Friday, the sixth night of their watch, Simon had his plan ready; he'd walk into the restaurant the following afternoon after Dmitri arrived, take a seat in the dining area, and ask to see the Russian. Simon would tell him about the deposit when the restaurant was busy, sitting near the exit in case he had to make a quick escape. It was a good plan, he thought, nice and simple. But he still had to convince Filip, and that wouldn't be easy.

By ten-thirty, the tourists were emptying out of The St. Petersburg. The busboys were mopping floors and clearing tables, and in the kitchen, the cooks were putting away food and packing up leftovers to bring home to their families. Simon watched the cooks divvying up fish curry and malai kofta, his stomach growling because he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. He looked at Filip, and seeing the way his eyes followed the containers of food like those of a begging dog's, Simon knew Filip was thinking the same thing.

"I'm going to get something to eat," Simon said. "Do you want anything?"

Filip nodded, his eyes still focused on the kitchen. "If you're going, get something for me too. I'll keep watch here and see what Dmitri is up to tonight."

"Alright, but don't make a move if he leaves."

"Sure," Filip said.

Simon ducked under the barrier wall and made his way to the boardwalk. He had a few rupees in his pocket, and planned to buy leftovers from one of the restaurants along the promenade.

Filip watched Simon leave, keeping tight to the wall and out of the light, even though he was on the opposite side of the eight foot high barrier, and well out of view of The St. Petersburg. Simon always talked about being careful and being prepared, but Filip thought he was just scared. The job wasn't so difficult in Filip's mind, and didn't need much preparation. True, the Russians were dangerous, but they were fair game like everyone else. Filip thought maybe it was time he took charge of their duo, and started making some real decisions.

Within a minute of Simon's departure, the staff had left the restaurant, leaving it empty except for Dmitri. He appeared in the kitchen with the black bag, hiding it in the back of the old fridge. Then he closed the door that led to the dining room, exited out the back door, got in his car and drove away. Usually, Dmitri hung around the restaurant for an hour or two, making some phone calls, but tonight, he rushed away, and Filip wondered why he was doing things differently.

But now Filip was alone with the restaurant and that bag full of money, and he couldn't think about anything else. It was simple, in and out in thirty seconds, the easiest job he'd ever

done. If he let Simon have his way, they'd be waiting for the next month, and by that time Dmitri could have a new hiding place for The St. Petersburg's deposits. Now was the time. Now.

Filip climbed over the crumbling concrete wall and ran across the lot. The back door was locked, but just to the left was a small window. He picked up a baseball-sized rock, wrapped his t-shirt around it to dull the noise, and smashed the window. Laying his shirt along the bottom of the frame, he climbed into the kitchen.

Inside, it was pitch black. Filip bumped into the counter, knocking a stack of cooking pots to the tiled floor in a deafening crash, and he cringed. Finally, he found the light cord in the middle of the room, and as the light came on his eyes adjusted to the brightness, the stainless steel counters and tiled floor gleaming from their nightly scrub-down. Apart from the mess of pots on the floor, the kitchen was meticulously clean and orderly.

He went straight to the back panel of the fridge, pulling it away easily. In seconds he had the black bag in his hand, and it felt heavy, like it was full of sand, and Filip smiled. Inside he found six tightly folded bundles of cash, one from each night since the past Saturday. Filip was already thinking of Simon returning with the food to their hill behind the wall, and how he would surprise Simon with the money. The first thing in the morning, they would take the bus to the city to buy some new clothes.

He turned out the light and was about to leave when he heard an engine and saw the lights of the black BMW shine through the window, circling the kitchen like a flying saucer. Another car followed, both vehicles maneuvering so that their headlights were aimed at the kitchen. After a few seconds, the engines shut off, but the lights stayed on. Filip ducked, and crept across the room to the only other exit, the door to the dining room. But it was locked and wouldn't budge.

He heard footsteps in the parking lot, the crunch of shoes on cool night gravel, and voices. Once they reached the door and the broken window, the voices stopped. Filip heard the unmistakable click of a semi-automatic clip, the slide cocking and retreating, and his world came crashing down with cruel clarity: the men outside were real criminals, and would probably kill him. He looked around desperately for a hiding place, but there were no closets, no cupboard, nowhere at all to hide. Their mercy would have to be his only chance. If he pleaded, they might let him go. He was just a kid, after all.

The door opened, and Dmitri entered first, a black shadow framed by the blinding yellow light from the cars. He turned toward the fridge, the light flickering off his gold chain, his gun pointed right at Filip as if he'd known exactly where Filip was before he'd even entered the room.

Dmitri didn't say anything when he saw the boy standing in the corner with his hands in the air and the deposit bag at his feet, just gestured Filip forward with his gun. When the other man walked into the kitchen, and Filip recognized him as a Russian bag man named Bobby. Bobby didn't work for Dmitri, but for the higher-ups Dmitri was responsible to pay, and he was ruthless and uncompromising, a killer.

## 21. The Hard Drive

Travis had to admit it, the kid had talent. He had guts, too. If he'd have been caught in North Town, Fisher would have killed him, but only after he got the whole story out of him, and then some. Maybe Frank was right about the kid after all.

Travis took the hard drive out of his pocket and put it on Frank's desk, and Frank's eyes lit up in a way that Travis hadn't seen since the old days. Frank held it to the lights above his desk that never seemed to die.

To Travis, it just looked like a piece of junk, like every other bit of technology that littered the landscape, rusting and degrading. After the fall, Travis had felt no sympathy for the people who had let each new advancement, each piece of technological modernity infiltrate their lives, never considering what would happen if the devices failed. Whole lives were tied to these technologies, and when they were rendered lifeless within days, the consequent reversion to simplicity was a hard concept to grasp. Without the internet and without power, the computers and hand-held devices that dictated everything from which route to take into the city to the contact information for anyone they might have known, was lost. The ones who survived the flood lived in tight-knit groups of family and trusted neighbours. Life was proximity, and proximity was life.

For Travis, the minimalism of life after the fall, the concise immediacy of it, was more natural than anything he'd ever felt before. Analog living, he called it. And because his mother had died not long after he left the reserve, he was free of responsibility, ready to embrace what the world offered him. He'd felt closer than ever to the animalism that he believed pervaded all people. He knew it was the Mohawk in him that leaned him this way, old Jack's stories coming back to haunt him, whether he welcomed them or not.

“Good job, Simon,” Frank said. “I still need to test it, but good job. And he didn’t suspect anything?”

Simon shook his head. “He had no idea. It was an easy job.”

“You see, Travis, what did I tell you?”

Travis looked at Simon, smiling, but his eyes said that if Simon mentioned anything about what had happened on River Road, he was a dead man. Travis figured he’d already made his point clear enough, that Simon knew better than to insinuate himself between Travis and Frank. But ever since the screw-up on the trail, Simon had an air about him, unspoken but definitely there. Youthful arrogance. Not good for the long run, if that’s what this was going to be. Travis would have to keep an eye on that, come down hard if it got out of hand.

“You were right,” Travis said.

Frank put the hard drive on the desk, beaming as he looked at Simon. “I knew you’d get it done. Like I said before, I could use you around here. Think about it.” He handed Simon a small bag of coins. “I’ll be seeing you again soon. Until then, take it easy. Have some fun on me. Tomorrow, Travis will come by with the rest of your money. You understand I need to check out the hard drive first.”

“Of course,” Simon said. “I’ll be waiting.”

Travis was tired from the long walk. He sat on the leather chair closest to Frank’s desk.

Frank picked up the hard drive again, mesmerized by the tiny bits of plastic and metal wiring, the fineness of it. “Strange, isn’t it, how much we relied on technology before, and now it’s just . . . static.”

“But we have the generator here, and a computer.”

“Yes we do. But without the internet, and its connection to the outside world, it’s meaningless. The hard drive will set us apart more than anything else. That’s why the kid is so important to us. His skill, a guy who can get things done nice and quietly, is invaluable. Don’t let anything happen to him, Travis. We’re going to need him again, very soon.”

Travis nodded. So the kid was his responsibility now. “What’s on the hard drive, Frank?”

Frank smiled the way he used to when they’d first met, when Frank still considered everything a test. “Let me worry about that for now.” His smile faded. “We have another problem. This one you need to deal with swiftly, and no need to be tactful, either. There was an incident in the market while you were away. Some sort of dispute. Someone no one has ever seen before killed one of my men with a steel pipe in front of a crowd of people.”

Nobody touched Frank’s men in South Town. The thought disturbed Travis. “Who got it?” he asked.

“Leo. Head crushed in broad daylight. Then the guy broke another man’s arm. Blood everywhere. People are concerned.”

Travis never liked Leo much. He was a drinker and a bit of a psychopath, a liability. But when he wasn’t drunk, which was at least half of the time, he took orders pretty well. His murder in South Town was bad for business, broke all the rules.

“After he killed him,” Frank said, “he gave his money to the crowd, and then paid a vendor with his own money.”

“Fisher’s guy?”

“He said he wasn’t.”

“Who’d he say it to?”

“Leo, before he killed him.”



“So who is he?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? We need to quell this thing, whatever it is, before the people start talking more than they already are.”

“He gave money to the people?”

“That’s right, handed it out to the crowd. Bad for us, Travis. The last thing we need right now is some sort of crusader breaking the rules. There’s already an uneasy feeling in the air, and we need to stop this before it progresses any further. So find him. Kill him. Make an example.”

“Could be a loner got past the gate again.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. I’m leaving it with you.” Frank wrapped the hard drive in a handkerchief and put it in his pocket. “Just get it done.”

Travis left Frank’s office and took the elevator to the ground floor. He’d walked forty kilometres already today and was exhausted, and now he had to walk to his own apartment. He couldn’t get the market incident out of his mind. It sounded personal to Travis, like the guy was trying to make a point. You don’t bash someone’s head in with a steel pipe for no good reason, not because he stepped in front of you in a lineup. It didn’t make sense. And now it was Travis’s problem. He needed to talk to some people. He would start tomorrow, first thing, after he’d had a shot or two and slept for a few hours. He’d get Dan to ask around at the dodgy bars those guys from North Town hung around. The big guy had some contacts, and was about due to start making himself useful again.

## 22. The Way In

Anton watched Travis Parker and another man approach the apartment building. It was the second time Anton had seen the man; both times he was escorted into the building with Travis. Frank kept a tight-knit circle around him, and as far as Anton had seen, there were never any outsiders, not until now. The man looked young, maybe thirty, about the same age as Anton.

Anton watched as the guards searched the man for weapons, and asked a few questions, which the man appeared to answer without difficulty. The guards paid more attention to Travis, however, taking their time to make sure he wasn't being frogmarched in with a gun stuck in his back. They studied his expression, looked for any sign that he might be compromised, that the other man was anything other than who Travis said he was. After a few minutes the guards were satisfied, and allowed the two men entrance to the building. Anton had to admire Frank's thoroughness; his mistrust extended even to his closest and longest ally.

They took the elevator up to the thirteenth floor that housed Frank Baxter's apartment and office. Anton could hear the generator rumbling away like an idling truck, that long-ago extinct sound that more than anything else singled out Frank and his building. He hadn't heard the sound of an engine since he was a kid, and it was like soft music, the promise of a long drive. He thought about the last trip his family had taken to the southern coast, driving that old, green minivan for three days, when he was a child. He had played football on the beach with his older brother, who even though he was eighteen, nearly a man and off to university in the fall, always had time for his much younger sibling. His brother had taken him everywhere, taught him everything. He was Anton's best friend.

But the sound emanating from Frank's building told a different story, conjured different imagery. This was the sound of a man's greed. A generator could power whatever Frank wanted.

He could have pumped the energy into the community for any number of uses, but instead he hoarded it for himself, powering only his building. No wonder the people were beginning to turn on him.

Through his binoculars, Anton watched Travis and the other man enter Frank's office. He saw Travis take something out of his jacket pocket and carefully hand it to Frank. There was great deference in this action, and in the way the three of them formed a semi-circle around the object. Whatever the object was, Frank looked happy, smiling and shaking the new guy's hand before he left. Then, Frank and Travis Parker were alone. They sat and talked the way they always did when no one was around, like father and son. Of course Anton couldn't hear what they were saying, but their body language said it for them: Frank preaching, Travis listening. Frank often sat on the corner of his desk so that he was higher, forcing Travis to look up at him. All carefully orchestrated, no doubt. Anton often wondered about their relationship, how strong their bond really was. Initially, Anton had thought he might use Travis to gain access to building, by threatening or blackmailing him somehow, but the longer he studied Travis Parker, the more he realized that Travis Parker was a man with nothing to lose. No ties, no woman, no friends—nobody but Frank. Anton knew he could never make Travis turn on Frank simply because there was no leverage.

Anton looked at the gun and clip lying on the floor beside him, wondering what Frank knew about the incident in the market. He hadn't wanted it to go down like that, but he couldn't take it back. He didn't give a shit about the man he'd killed; he'd seen the badness in his eyes. The man needed killing, and Anton was fine doing it. The way he looked at it, he'd just done the world a favour. But South Town was tightly run, and Frank would be looking for him now. He'd have to lie low until the pressure subsided.

Anton had never been able to control his temper. After the fall, he almost killed a Polish kid in a playground. Anton and his brother were across the river by then, finally settled into some sort of normal life. The kid had said something about Anton's parents who'd died in the fall, and Anton went after him like a maniac, squeezing the kid's throat until his eyes bugged out of his head and his brother pulled him off. Anton was only eleven, but he knew he was going to kill the kid, and if his brother wasn't there, he's sure he would have. He'd have squeezed until he felt something give, until the kid stopped fighting back.

Anton's brother always told him that you don't kill someone for nothing. Violence, he'd said, was a good man's last resort. Anton had asked him once that if the world had changed so much that you could kill and not go to jail, why wouldn't you just kill if you had to, and then people would leave you alone. His brother answered that because the world had changed so much was exactly why they shouldn't kill one another. The good people, he'd said, needed to set the rules.

A lot of good this generosity did him, Anton had thought.

He turned his binoculars to the front entrance and watched the new guy walk out the door. The guards nodded at him this time, didn't even unsling their shotguns. Maybe the next time he would arrive by himself, and the guards wouldn't search him at all.

Anton watched him turn north and head back to the center of town. It was getting dark now, the man's silhouette growing smaller with each step away from the illuminated building. There was something about the man that was different than Frank and Travis and the usual rabble that Anton saw around the building.

He looked back into Frank's office and saw that Travis and Frank were still talking. Anton could follow the new guy, get far enough down the road so Frank wouldn't see him when

he left the building too, but he'd have to go now. Quickly, Anton put on his navy coat and black wool hat, grabbed the gun off the floor, popped in the clip that still held five shots, and took off down the condominium stairs, taking them two at a time.

### 23. The Word of Nature

Father John lit a candle in the sacristy, a tiny room beside the apse with a small bench and sink. On the brief countertop were glass bottles that carried the cider, a prized item that the priests hoarded, dispensing only for special occasions, and on the shelf above were the wicker baskets used for collections that took place each morning on the cathedral steps.

Travis never understood why the poorest willingly gave up their few coins to the priests, begging for food in return. But Father John encouraged their donations, telling the people they were buying much more than food, that they were making an investment in their future, to a time when everything they'd taken for granted would come back to haunt them. He said the people had to prepare for the change that was coming, and needed to be sure they had remembered God in their lives, because they will all need God sooner than they thought.

Travis didn't believe in God, only evolution. He believed that nature had a way of weeding out the weak, and that's what the fall had been. Frank used to say they were agents of nature, that it went against evolution to allow something weak to survive. He'd said that expecting help from a God that no one had ever actually seen was old-fashioned and unrealistic, and that the only way a man would survive was by being his own God.

Travis recognized Father John's words as bribery and scare tactics, the same devices employed by other bad men he'd known over the years. The priests' God was the one of power and greed, the same as it was for any authority figure. The priests weren't real priests, not as Travis remembered. They'd been other things, men with families, with pasts both good and bad, who'd found a version of God after the fall. They preached from the bible, lived in the cathedral, and wore monk's robes, but they were still only men trying to survive.

And the will to survive can make a man do just about anything.

Travis understood the priests' plan. The poor were the majority in South Town, and if Father John could get them on side, Frank would have a real force to contend with. Sometimes he recognized flashes of a storied past in Father John's eyes and words, hints that he was much more than he appeared to be.

But Father John was so convincing in his portrayal of a devoted priest that Travis was blind to all else, his words so deep and profound that Travis wanted whole-heartedly to believe him, even though his instincts told him otherwise. Every time Father John spoke, Travis felt better. The pressure of the cathedral faded away, and the guilt he'd carried for years was forgotten. It was the people that scared him most. For years he'd bullied them, inflicted hurt without reprimand, and they weren't afraid of him anymore. The faces that used to turn away in fear, no longer turned away. Travis saw their revenge like a great reckoning on the horizon, and Father John promised amnesty, not just with the people, but within Travis himself. This, above all else, was why Travis kept coming back.

"His name is Anton," Father John said.

"Last name?" Travis asked, leaning against the wall of the tiny room.

The priest shrugged, bringing the candle flame to the next unlit wick, his round face glowing as the flame licked close to his beard. It would go up fast, Travis thought, the robe too, like a canvas sack.

"No last name," Father John said. "One of my people was in the market when it happened, a vendor. He talked to this Anton, he saw the whole thing. He said he was asking questions about Frank the day before."

Travis frowned. "What questions?"

“The usual kind if you were new to South Town. Questions about food and money, about who’s in charge.”

“And Leo?”

“He never mentioned Leo, but that doesn’t mean this Anton didn’t ask about him. I asked my people to come forward if they knew anything, but they’re scared. The man handed out gold coins after he committed murder. This is an upsetting of things, very confusing. I can assure you that nobody here likes it one bit. This town has a balance that must be adhered to, this is more important than anything else. Even if we don’t agree on all things, we must work together on this. We need to find this villain and hang him in the square, show people that things aren’t upside down.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Good. One thing is certain: he’s an outsider. Of the witnesses, none had ever seen him before.”

“Except the vendor.”

“Yes, the day before.”

“Why didn’t your vendor try to stop him after he killed Leo? He just let him get away.”

“Don’t even go down that road Travis. It’s your men who are supposed to be policing this town. And for the life of *that* man they’re supposed to risk their lives? Leo was one of the rare cases where I’d be tempted to say we’re all better off. But still, if Frank has enemies here, we’re all vulnerable.”

Travis laughed. “You have no idea what it takes to protect this town. We keep the loners out, and you still cause trouble.”



“We don’t cause trouble, Travis. It was already here. We just listen, and keep the channels open to God.”

“To God,” Travis echoed. But he knew what Father John meant. The priests were leveraging the people against Frank, and if they were half as smart or nimble as Frank, they would have had their coup already. The truth was they didn’t have the pull on the inside, which they would need to sway Frank’s men and open doors once Frank was gone. Father John was after Travis’s allegiance, wanted him to betray Frank and help the priests seize South Town. Travis hated the priest for this, but still, he couldn’t help himself.

“All paths lead to God,” Father John said.

“So you keep saying.”

Father John sat on the bench beside Travis, brought his face close to Travis’s. His eyes were profoundly sad as he leaned in and said, “Tell me about the faces.”

Travis winced. Fucking priest. “Not today, father. I came for information, and now I have to go.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Travis got up, and Father John moved his knees to let him pass. The small room felt like the inside of an organ to Travis, like a heart, or something smaller, a spleen, damp and emanating heat. He felt strange inside the church. Timid at first, frightened, the ancient carving of the saviour peering at him as he entered, judging him, the great arches overhead looking overburdened and tired, ready to collapse and pin him to the ground where he would lie trapped, suffering a great deal, and in seven days he would die of dehydration.

A dog would piss on his head.

But then he would talk with Father John, whom he loathed and admired simultaneously. Travis wanted to kill him and at the same time he yearned for his approval. Like the son of a surly father, Travis sought Father John's acceptance. Father John asked difficult questions, pressing Travis for answers, and it was only after Travis answered that he felt better, and the inside of the cathedral began to feel like a place of comfort and protection and not a death trap. He began to trust the ancient arches. He wanted to hold Father John close and absorb his wisdom from an earlier, simpler time, as simple as the priest's brown robe, his direct questions. And like every moment of catharsis Travis had with the priest, it started with a thought, an image so simple it stuck in his mind like a knife.

"His back was turned," Travis said, surprising himself. He was nearly out the door, but now the priest had him. Travis sat back down on the bench, taking a deep breath. The walls of the cramped room expanded, breathing with him. It was awhile before he spoke again, and the priest was patient. A practiced art form, Travis thought. Even at the moment when Travis confessed his sins he scrutinized his confessor, looked for cracks in his make-up, reasons not to proceed. He wanted a word from nature to rain down on him and set him free from what he was about to do. He wanted the word to tell him this was the wrong path, that Father John was the enemy.

But the word didn't come; it never did.

## 24. Fallout

On most nights, cooks and busboys sold leftovers along the back-alley that ran behind the strip of tourist restaurants on the promenade. A few rupees bought a plate of fish curry or vegetable biryani for a fraction of the menu price. Simon recognized a busboy named Zoze behind a table with a large fish, outside the Goan Star Restaurant. Zoze's white shirt was loose and open, swaying in the night breeze. He waved Simon over.

"Kalaanji," he said. "Boss caught it yesterday, but nobody want to buy. Go bad tomorrow. Five rupees and I give you whole plate."

"What about Filip?" Simon asked, eyeing the fish.

"Eight rupees for two plates, but don't tell anyone." Zoze said.

Simon reached into his pockets. "I only have six. Can you hold two plates, and I'll come back with the rest?"

"Okay, but give me the six now and hurry back."

Simon handed the money to Zoze and ran back to the barrier wall, hoping that Filip had two rupees.

When Simon returned to the barrier wall and Filip wasn't there, he knew something was wrong. He peeked over the top, and saw that a light was on in the kitchen of The St. Petersburg. Dmitri's BMW entered the parking lot, headlights shining on the broken window beside the back door. Simon knew Filip was in there, but there was nothing he could do. So he hid, and watched.

Dmitri and another man got out of the car, immediately noticing the window. They went into the restaurant with guns drawn, and came out a few moments later holding Filip by the neck. They walked him to the pool of light in front of the car, Dmitri grinning, he must've thought it

funny that a kid had tried to rob them. Filip was scowling, trying hard to look like a hardened tough.

Dmitri put away his gun and asked Filip some questions while the other man leaned against the car, smoking. Filip shook his head, looking defiantly at the Russian without talking. At first, Dmitri seemed to appreciate his courage, nodding and smiling at Filip. But after several minutes his patience ran out. When Dmitri asked another question and Filip didn't answer, Dmitri punched him hard in the mouth. Filip's head snapped back, then rebounded forward, eyes blinking erratically as he steadied himself, but he never went down. So Dmitri pulled his gun, and hit Filip on the side of his head.

Simon heard the crack like it was right beside him. Filip fell, holding his head, red with blood. He was on his knees, face in the dirt, and Simon knew he was hurt bad. Dmitri stood over him. "Who was with you?" he yelled. But still Filip wouldn't answer.

Dmitri used his foot to turn Filip over, shaking his head. "Why do you make me do this, kid?" He straddled Filip and began swinging with both fists, punching him as if he were a man.

Finally, when Dmitri stopped, Simon could hear Filip crying, seemed like he had been for a long time. It was a long whimper with no beginning or end, muffled by blood and bruised ribs. Simon could see his face—an unrecognizable battered mess.

Dmitri got up, and walked a few steps away before he turned around and approached Filip again, shaking his head as if he were seeing him for the first time, as though someone else had beaten him and left him in the dirt.

Dmitri looked genuinely sad as he knelt, speaking quietly into Filip's ear. And after a moment, Filip looked at the barrier wall and said something to Dmitri, to which the gangster nodded and gave a fatherly pat on the head, before walking to the car and lighting a cigarette.

He spoke briefly to the other man. There was not much of a discussion, only a quiet understanding of what was to be done. The other man nodded somberly, ground his cigarette under the heel of his shoe, walked over to Filip, and shot him in the back of the head with a small caliber pistol.

Dmitri never looked at Filip when the other man pulled the trigger, only at the wall, and Simon swore Dmitri was looking right at him, the Russian's glare penetrating the darkness, not angry so much as sad, shaking his head the way he did after he'd beaten Filip, as though his actions had nothing to do with him.

Simon dropped to his knees, heart pounding. He wanted to run but his legs were heavy, as if they were underwater. He wanted to curl up as small as he could, and hide.

Then he heard the car door slam, the sound startling him enough to bring him back to reality. He got to his feet, steadied himself, and started running. He ran from the barrier wall all the way to the farm outside Kochi, ignoring the burning pain in his lungs, fighting the picture of the man he didn't know murdering his friend, an image that kept playing out in his mind: the gun at the back of Filip's head, the man shooting him as if it were nothing.

## 25. Something Out of Nothing

“Small luxuries, that’s what it’s all about. Little moments. The things in life you overlook until it’s too late. I never figured that out until recently, thought I had it all figured out back when I was your age, you’re goddamn right I did. I was cocky as hell, just like you, always looking for the next thing. Then one day, it changed. Not when you might think, not with the fall. My change happened much later. You see, I woke up one day, and it was just another ordinary day, but for some reason I felt different. I remember I had something important to take care of—business. I was about to swing my feet out of bed when I saw this bird in the window. It was a robin, perched on the ledge of that high window in the corner of the cathedral, and he sang to me. I never really liked birds that much. Or, more accurately, I never gave them a second thought, and I still have no particular feelings towards them. But on that morning, that robin sang to me, I swear it. And instead of getting up and beginning my day normally, I just lay there in bed, listening. He sang for a long time, the sky bright blue behind him, framing him like a portrait, and it was just about the most beautiful thing I had ever experienced. I know it sounds silly, but believe me when I say that moment changed my life. It was a message, clear as day, clear as the blue sky in the window, that life is short, and that every single moment of it means something. It was clarity.

“I’ve heard people say they gained clarity with the fall, that the event put their lives in perspective, made them who they are now. But the fall didn’t change me; it just gave me a clearer vision of myself. I was making a living off other people’s losses, selling stolen things to bad men, employing bad men. And before I knew it, I’d become them. It was easy to take my way of life and expand it into Frank’s world because I was halfway there already, and I admired Frank. So we made a deal: he gave me the cathedral, and I provided him my best talent. So you

see, the fall didn't change me; it was only another obstacle in my path. The bodies in the street, the killing, the cannibalism, through all the goddamn shit I was always the same old Harry. So I find it kind of funny when I think about the root of my transformation, that what humanity at its worst couldn't do for me, a small bird did without me even realizing. My moment of clarity was as simple as nature being nature."

Harry leaned back in the pew and looked up at the ceiling as though he expected the robin to appear again and sing. He looked old to Simon, smaller and greyer. It could have been the way he was speaking. Only old people spoke like that, old people who have stopped trying.

"This is the thing with Frank," Harry continued. "It's never a one-time deal. He might say that you can decide for yourself, but deep down you know that's not true, because he's already decided for you. He'll keep coming at you—the one-offs will turn into bigger jobs, the risk will grow. So will the pay, but I never saw you as the type who cared about that, I never have."

"I have a skill," Simon said. "Baxter's just a means to an end."

"But with Frank there will be no end."

"You sound like a hypocrite."

"Maybe I am. But I've seen the end for some time now, the shift that's coming. Frank lasted fifteen years, which is something. We can say what we want, but without Frank, we'd be a lot worse off. He created a new world out of the still-burning embers of the old one, he created something out of nothing. He did it with brute force, but he did it. And because of the strength of his creation, he's now threatened. The hard work has been done, and others call him to question. I'm not defending him. I think the man is an animal, the worst kind of human being. But few people could have done what he did. We all forget too quickly what it was like before Frank. But

the voice of the people is never wrong. They won't accept his tyranny for much longer because they don't have to. There are other leaders."

"The priests," Simon said.

Harry nodded. "Father John is too persuasive not to become a real force in this town. And Frank knows he can't just kill him because the priests are too powerful now—there would be an uprising." Harry looked at the ceiling again. "Revolutions only happen when there is no war. With nothing terrible bearing down on this community Frank's position is precarious. Maybe he did his job too well."

"It won't be that easy."

"I never said it would," Harry snapped. "Frank won't give up anything without a fight. But I'm sure of one thing: without a game changer, something to put some fear back into this town, his days are numbered. You can count on that. The people are turning on him, turning to Father John. Frank knows it, and he'll do everything he can to solidify his power. Remember this when you see him next."

Simon knew the priests were organizing against Frank, but he didn't see how a coup was possible when Frank's men still had all the weapons. But like a chess player, Harry saw things several moves ahead, and he'd begun to defy Frank in small ways. Maybe he was thinking about his location inside the cathedral being a natural joiner to the priests. Or maybe he was just spreading out his appeasements, covering all the angles so he could pick a side when it came down to it. One thing about Harry Simon knew intimately was that he was a master fence sitter, adept at playing on all teams.



Simon knew he might be on the wrong side of things himself, but a job was a job, more than that when Frank insisted. He had no choice now but to stay the course with Frank or else suffer the consequences, a point he reiterated to Harry.

“But you’re not like him,” Harry said, “or Travis Parker. And sooner or later you won’t be able to hide it from them anymore. You’re good, but they’ll see through you.”

“And you’re like them?”

“No, but I never let them see me, I mean really see me. I’m always just Harry in the cathedral, the man with the men. But you must have made an impression on Frank. You’re more than just a grunt to him now.”

“I do a job well, that’s what Frank sees. But I’m just a tool to him. And if you think the priests will let you pick a side when you’re ready, they won’t. They’ll want your support publicly if they’re planning something, they’ll make you choose sides.”

“Probably,” Harry said. “But I still have time to figure it out, you don’t. This thing with Frank will take on a life of its own before you know it. He’s not done with you by a long shot. Just remember who you are.”

Usually, Harry had some wisdom about him, and Simon knew what he was trying to say—that Frank had a way of getting his hooks into people, making them forget what they stood for. Frank knew exactly what to say to a person to make them feel valued.

“This job was different, Harry. I came back from North Town with a hard drive, stole it from a courier given up by that old bartender you sent me to. I delivered it to Frank. Have you heard anything about this?”

“Nothing. Once Travis took you to see Frank, they cut me out.”

“Can you find out?”

“I can see what information is floating around.”

“You still have a man inside?”

Harry nodded. “Of course.”

“Good,” Simon said. “One more thing: the hard drive came from across the river, from the city.”

An organ started up in the choir, making a tremendous sound that echoed off the high arched walls and what remained of the old stained glass windows. When dispersed across the narrow streets and hunkered family dwellings of South Town, this sound was the priest’s calling card, luring the steadfast congregation and new recruits alike. Lately, the priests had begun to play at night when the cathedral was empty and few people walked the streets, and the sound had become a nighttime tradition that tied the community together, linking the people’s worship. Even in darkness, as the grey skies foretold the onset of another cold winter, the priests influenced and won followers.

Harry and Simon didn’t speak while the organ played. The music was beautiful, the passion and skill of the instrument’s player evident in each meticulous key stroke. It was a near perfect melody that communicated beauty like nothing else in South Town. It brought back memories, made people want for what they’d long forgotten. The organ was the voice of the cathedral, of the priest’s energy, one aspect of their glittering arsenal of hope, sentiments that ran counter to everything doled out by Frank Baxter for the last fifteen years.

“Did I ever tell you about my log cabin?” Simon asked, knowing that he never had.

“When I was a teenager, we came back from India without a cent to our name. The only thing we had was an old log cabin way north of the city, which my father hadn’t seen since he was a boy, and so we went there to live.”

“You never told me you lived in India,” Harry said.

“I was born there. The cabin was a good home—old but sturdy, the kind of structure that will still be there a hundred years from now, kind of like this place. But I was a teenager, and I hated being there. I remember thinking only about how much I wanted to leave and go to the city where things happened. I remember we had this beautiful garden. It was the only thing I liked about living there. My mother planted everything you could think of, spent entire summers digging, watering, and pruning. She taught me everything she knew about gardening, all the practical skills she knew about self-sufficiency. She taught me how to store vegetables for the winter, how to store seeds and how to germinate them, how to turn soil. I’ve been thinking a lot about that cabin lately. I wonder if it’s still there, waiting for someone to find it, breathe some life into it. You know what I’m saying?”

Harry nodded, his eyes deep and thoughtful. He didn’t say anything and he didn’t need to.

Anton Vargas, sitting two pews behind, bowed his head and folded his hands under his chin. He waited for Simon and Harry to leave before he made the sign of the cross and left the pew, thinking about the conversation he’d heard between Simon and Harry, surprised to learn they were not the blind followers of Baxter he’d assumed them to be.

He opened the oak door and watched Simon’s silhouette disappear in the direction of the tunnel. There were apartments that way, near the river, and Anton figured that was where Simon was headed. He wanted to follow Simon, but knew the pickpocket would notice the tail, so instead he walked back to his hiding place in the condo, confident he knew where to pick up Simon’s trail tomorrow, confident in the simple plan he’d already worked out in his mind.

## 26. The New Normal

It was bright outside the cathedral, the moon full and the sky cloudless the way Simon imagined a winter night to be in the arctic, where you could walk forever into the horizon and never get tired or wait dawn to come.

When Simon was a child, he'd dreamed about visiting the arctic, a place that seemed so crisp and clean and devoid of people, where nature still reigned. Every notion he had of the remote northern landscape ran counter to life as he knew it in the subcontinent—people, heat, rolling oceans. On the crowded streets of Kochi, he'd wondered what it would be like to walk for miles and never see another person. In the summer heat of the Malabar Coast, he'd wanted to know what minus thirty felt like. Take me back home, he would say to his parents, I want go to the arctic. They would only laugh at him.

One time at the cabin he saw the northern lights and it was the most spectacular sight he'd ever laid eyes on. He stood watching for an hour in the cold before his father finally coaxed him inside with a cup of Indian chai, telling him how in the arctic the northern lights covered the whole sky in a great, moving swath of colour, and that the natives believed they were the face of another world, a guide for spirits to pass through to the heavens.

The story made Simon wonder what was on the other side of those beautiful impressions of green, blue, and white, if the world up there was better than the one he knew, which had seen his best friend murdered, and his family chased to the other side of the world. He figured that at the very least, it couldn't be any worse.

In the tunnel, tall buildings blocked the moonlight, and shadows from the rooftops cut sharp lines on the asphalt walkway. Only the hardest men were out at this hour, frequenting Frank's dodgy bars that sold cheap white liquor and half-hour stints with a woman.

Simon turned down the side street leading to his apartment when he saw two men stumble out of a bar, laughing. A moment later a third man in a black motorcycle jacket and flawlessly slicked black hair came out holding a woman by a handful of her long, brown hair. He was cursing and dragging her, trying not to spill the glass of liquor in his other hand. Simon recognized the pimp Rennie, who ran South Town's prostitution racket, a dozen or so whores working the narrow streets close to the river. Like most of Frank's worst deeds, the prostitutes made their living outside the public eye, away from the cathedral and tunnel market. Most had turned to Frank when they were destitute and starving, with no collateral beyond their own bodies. In return he offered them fifty percent off the top, and the protection of Rennie.

Rennie pushed the woman on the ground, then poured his drink on her. "You're always late," he said, "which makes me late. It's always the same old story with you, makes me look bad. Frank doesn't like waiting for his money." He got down close to her face, squeezing her jaw with his thumb and forefinger. "And I know you held out two nights ago. Half!" he yelled. "Off every dick. Hold out again, I'll cut your throat."

He shoved her face into the dirt. When she tried to stand, he kicked her in the ribs, not hard enough to cause damage, but just enough to keep her on the ground. She tried to get up and the other men circled, kicking and shoving. When she got to her feet, they knocked her down again, hitting her in the back of the knees and the ribs, all the while laughing and having a good time. The woman was a tough, hardened prostitute whom Simon had seen on the street before. She didn't look afraid of the men, and Simon knew this would only make it worse for her.

Finally, she sat down on the road and looked up at them through a mess of brown hair. She said something Simon couldn't hear.

The men were quiet while she spoke, and when she was done they stared at her, dumbfounded. As their anger mounted, Simon felt the energy flush through the alleyway like a gust of cold wind. The woman didn't try to run; she didn't even make an effort to appease them.

One of the men threw his empty glass on the ground beside her, sending bits of glass flying in every direction. She picked the glass out of her hair and brushed it off her clothes. The men looked at each other, their alcohol-saturated minds confused with how to proceed next. Inevitably, they turned to Rennie, who was calmer than the other two, less drunk, and infinitely more seasoned in the art of reasoning with a whore. But there was cruelty in his eyes, a cold sense of purpose that was devoid of anything resembling humanity. They were a pack of wolves, and he was their leader. They were hungry for a scene, something messy, something they couldn't take back, and Rennie would let them have it.

And all of this in Frank's name. It was Frank's bar, they were Frank's toughs, she was Frank's whore. Degrees of blood and violence like a shockwave of radiation, an eternal extension of the darkness that came hard and fast when the river poured into the city. His effects were long-term, suffering inflicted in half-lives, cancers of anger and humility, of ruler and subject, doled out by men who had no emotion, felt no remorse, went for the weakest parts, had sublime talents for finding soft underbellies.

Sometimes there are examples to be made, sometimes there are urges to be placated. But in the heat of the moment, one never knows where one ends and the other begins.

Simon thought about what Harry had said to him, that he wasn't like them at all. But somewhere inside he knew that he could become anything he needed to be. These men had

evolved into vessels of rage because nature had deemed it for their survival, and the very anger that had allowed them to survive was now a permanent part of them, welded to their souls, filling places left empty when they were children. Maybe fifteen years ago they were good kids.

But there was no nostalgia, there was only what was.

Simon wanted to run over and save her. He wanted to be able to talk these men down, but three against one were poor odds, and even if somehow they didn't kill him, he wouldn't be able to stop them. The scene had taken on a life of its own; not even Frank himself could stop them now.

The people in the bar would have heard her if she screamed, but she knew they wouldn't help her, because she didn't waste her breath; she just bowed her head like the poor people at the cathedral steps and accepted what was coming.

The men closed in, and Simon turned away. He walked back the way he had come, feeling sick. He stayed inside shadows of the buildings, hoping the men hadn't noticed him and wouldn't recognize him tomorrow or the day after.

## 27. From Before

The gash on Dan's head was formidable, running along his temple and curling under his eye like a fish hook. He walked through the tunnel market like a tidal wave of bad energy while the people stared, hoping he wasn't coming their way, which was exactly the reaction Travis wanted, whose sole reason for bringing Dan was to scare and intimidate, lubricate the inevitable.

The vendor was closing for the day, packing up his nearly empty cart, and when he saw Travis and Dan approach his eyes widened, face contorting into a look of fear. It lasted only a second, but nothing the vendor said or did would be able to erase Travis's initial impression that the man was a coward. Then, as though willing himself to show courage, the vendor turned and stared at Travis, trying hard to look angry.

"I need to talk to you," Travis said.

The vendor shrugged, continuing to take apart an aluminum pole holding up the cart's canvas awning. He was stocky, with large gnarled hands and sunken eyes etched with crows-feet from years of working outside. "I guess I should learn to keep my mouth shut," he said, looking straight at Travis.

Travis smiled. He liked it better when a man spoke his mind, because then he didn't feel bad hurting him when he didn't come around. "Yes," he said. "Or you can do things right by your boss."

The vendor put down the pole and leaned on the cart. "How's that?"

Travis motioned to a turned over milk crate beside the cart. "Have a seat," he said, and the man sat. Dan casually walked behind him, pushing at loose stones with his toe, pretending like he wasn't paying attention.

"The killing," Travis said. "Did you see it?"



“It was just up there.” The vendor pointed to where the road narrowed to a bottleneck. There was yellow sawdust on the ground to soak up the blood, a faint outline of red along its edge.

“I don’t know what kind of man would do this,” Travis said. “The sooner we catch him, the better. No one is safe until we do, especially you vendors.”

The man looked up at Travis, eyes hard and glassy. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“I find that surprising. Didn’t you talk to him?”

“Yes, well, he talked to me.”

“What about?”

“He asked about Frank.”

“Did he seem crazy?”

“No, not crazy. Just a man who wanted some answers.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Just what everybody else around here already knows.”

“You didn’t wonder about a man asking about things we already know?”

“Sure, I guess. But I thought he might be from North Town.”

“But anyone from North Town would know about Frank, wouldn’t they?”

The vendor scratched his head. “I guess. I really didn’t think about it too much. It was the middle of the day and the market was busy. He just seemed like a normal guy.”

“Until he murdered Leo.”

“I guess so, yes.”

“Did he ask about Leo before he killed him?”

“No, just Frank.”

Travis took a potato from the nearly empty cart, turning it over in his hand. It was bruised and covered in eyes, one of the day's rejects but still sellable. "Do you think he was a loner?"

Dan's eyes narrowed at the word loner. He was staring at the vendor from behind and to the side the way Travis had taught him, which agitated the vendor, who kept glancing over his shoulder.

"I don't know, I've never met one."

"They're not like what you think. Sometimes they're good talkers," Travis said. "Just ask Dan here."

"He seemed normal enough, if that's what you mean."

"So why would he ask about Frank, but kill Leo?"

"Because he cut the line-up," the vendor answered. "That's what it was about, wasn't it?"

"You tell me," Travis said.

The vendor shrugged. "That's what I saw."

"Why aren't you afraid of him?"

"Because he's not after me."

"But he wasn't after Leo either, he just snapped."

"Leo had it coming," the vendor said too quickly.

Dan's fist was clenched, ready to move on the vendor but Travis waved him off, mildly amused by the man's courage.

"It's nothing against you," the vendor said. "But everyone knows Leo had this coming to him. And if it wasn't this guy who did it, it would have been someone else. Maybe not out in the open, not in the tunnel on a busy day, but sometime, he would have got his. The only thing I regret is that my boy had to see it. Other than that, it's business as usual. I won't lose any sleep

over Leo, and I'm not afraid of the guy who killed him because I didn't piss him off. But I'll tell you one thing, whoever did piss him off should be afraid, because whatever this guy's after, he's going to get it. You can bet on that."

Travis looked at the man, surprised he had the guts to speak to him like that. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had, and the rush of adrenaline, his heart pounding in his chest, the upset feeling in his stomach, felt good. He smiled, again shaking his head at Dan, who by now was looking like a rabid dog, ready to let loose if Travis would just give the go-ahead.

But if the man wasn't afraid to talk to Travis like that, the priests' influence ran deeper than Travis thought. He remembered the conversation he'd had with Father John the night before, how the priest was able to get him talking even when he didn't want to, especially when he didn't want to. He'd said things he shouldn't have. He'd talked about Frank.

Suddenly, the emotions Travis felt from his own confessions came rushing forward in a great wave. He saw his own betrayal in the man and wanted to hurt him. Not because of what the man had said, but because of what Travis himself had said to Father John.

"Business as usual," Travis said, standing over him, the rage building. "If I were you, I'd remember who runs this town, and I'd think very carefully before I said anything else. Business as usual is what Frank says it is, just like always. What's your name?"

"Mark."

"You have a boy?"

"Yes."

"How do you think he'd do with an unemployed father, or how about no father? Do you understand me, Mark? Do you have a wife?"

Mark nodded.

“Of course you do. I bet she’s real pretty. You keep her inside the house, don’t you. Think about your family the next time you go to see Father John, because he won’t help you if you if you forget who your boss is, nobody will.”

Mark was staring at his feet, unable to face Travis. Good, thought Travis, think about your boy, your pretty wife. Think about what we’ll do to her if you get strong all of a sudden, because you’re not strong. You’re just what we allow you to be and nothing more. You’re just a vendor, never forget that, never let Father John tell you any different.

Travis felt better; it was like having a cigarette. “Why did he tell you his name?”

“I asked him.”

“What was it?”

“Anton.”

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

Dan put his huge hand on Mark’s shoulder and squeezed.

The vendor’s rebelliousness had unraveled right before their eyes, and when he looked up at Travis it was with the same frightened look he’d had when he’d first laid eyes on them, but this time he couldn’t shake it. It was fear, the kind that makes a person act a certain way, the kind that South Town was founded on.

“There’s something else,” he said quietly. “I’m sure I’ve seen him before. Not now, I mean, not recently. I remember him from before. In the city, maybe, or after. I know him from somewhere a long time ago. I remember him when he was just a boy, an angry boy.”

## 28. Locked

The falling snow was a blur of spinning white. Close to the thirteenth floor window the flakes were separate, twisting and floating against gravity, but a few meters out they melded into each other, creating the illusion of singularity.

Frank always said the snow gave him comfort. The first big storm of the season had a calming effect on the community, like a family pulling together during hard times. This was when Frank felt the most fatherly, his reach the most profound.

“I want you to send men to the poorer parts of town today, make sure there’s enough wood to go around. These people need to know who will keep them warm this winter.”

“And the priests?”

“Let them collect their own firewood from the outskirts. Have the stacks of wood guarded. Put the word out that I won’t help them, or their followers. Let’s see the priests take care of themselves for a few months and get a feel for real responsibility, something beyond just simple words.”

Travis liked it when Frank took a hard line. Nothing made a person humbler than being cold all the time. That first winter in South Town dozens of people froze to death in their own homes. They had burned anything that would ignite: furniture, books, photo albums, stripping houses of all things combustible: walls, floorboards, support beams, reducing them to skeletons and brick facades. And still, it hadn’t been enough.

Now Frank’s men harvested wood in the outskirts, and stockpiled it in warehouses throughout town. They cut in spring to allow the timber a few months to dry out before winter’s onset, using axes and crosscut saws. Three men cutting, one keeping watch with a shotgun.

Frank lit a cigar, peering into the swirl of white like he could actually see something out there. His shirt looked crisp, impeccable against the window, and even his graying hair, a few shades darker than the falling snow, melded seamlessly into the scene outside.

“The hard drive is locked,” he said abruptly. “Our best tech, a computer genius fifteen years ago, said it’s locked up tighter than anything he’s ever seen. It’s military; he can’t hack the password.” He took a long drag, exhaling heavily. “God I hate technology. I hate it even more now that it’s gone. I like things you can feel in your hands, tangible things. No wonder we let the city drown, watched those buildings burn, the nice cars turn to scrap. Sometimes I believe it was a subconscious act, a technological cleansing we conjured up ourselves. We were sick of our excessiveness and wanted to start over; we just didn’t know how to go about doing it, so nature did it for us.

“It feels wrong using the device when I’m so opposed to it, but you see I had no choice. I couldn’t let Fisher have it. I could have destroyed it, but that would have been reckless. Personal feelings should never trump what’s best for the community. History is full of such examples, the inability to adapt, evolve quickly enough. You must always think of the bigger picture, even if that means doing something you don’t agree with. Because the minute you start thinking that your way is the only way, you’re finished.” He leaned into the window frame, nearly pressing his face to the spotless glass, trying to make out something in the spinning white, anything. “The courier you stole it from—find him and bring him back here. He’ll have the code, and if he doesn’t, he’ll know who does.”

“Taking him from North Town won’t be easy. People will notice,” Travis said.

“Maybe. But a courier disappears a couple of days after the hard drive is stolen doesn’t mean anything definite. There are degrees of separation between us and the courier; we assured

that when we used Simon for the job. Fisher will need time to figure it all out. You need to bring the courier back here.”

Travis was already thinking of how to get it done. The kid was the only one who knew what the courier looked like, so he would have to go. But the job required muscle, which meant Dan. Once they made the courier in North Town, the kid would play backup, make sure Dan didn't get cracked on the head again.

Frank offered Travis a cigar. It was long, perfectly rolled and sweet smelling, reminding Travis of the Cuban cigars he used to steal as a teenager from his mother's boyfriend, Alex, who had driven a Cadillac and had tough-guy friends. Alex knew Travis took the cigars, but never said anything. He only looked at Travis when he opened the humidor for his ritual late-night smoke, calling out the transgression in a way that only Travis understood. Alex's effort to play the cool boyfriend wasn't lost on Travis, who by that time had been subjected to several of his mother's flings, multiple approaches to boyfriends being cool. Nor did his cigar generosity make Travis like him anymore. All it meant was that Travis could keep smoking the cigars.

Alex was with Travis's mother for a little over three years, never officially moving in, but coming over just about every day, usually arriving late at night. At the house he had a dresser full of clothes, a set of expensive Ping golf clubs, and of course, the humidor. Travis recognized early on that Alex wasn't a regular sort of guy with a regular sort of job. He slept in late, came home late, and paid for things with cash. His job seemed to consist solely of driving to different bars, strip clubs, and restaurants, talking briefly to somebody in charge, and then leaving. Travis knew this because Alex would give him rides into the city, sometimes conducting business along the way. At home, Alex never invited his friends into the house, preferring to entertain in the

garage. He would send Travis to fetch a couple of beers, sometimes telling him to fetch one for himself, but only if Travis didn't blab to his mother, which of course he never did.

One day they stopped for gas in a suburb just north of the city, and while Alex was inside paying, Travis opened the Cadillac's glove box and found a nickel-plated nine-millimeter and a box of rounds. When Alex returned to the car Travis had the gun on his lap, and asked Alex how to load it. Alex never flinched. He looked calmly at Travis for a moment and answered, "It's already loaded," and then, "You ever shoot a gun?"

They drove to a deserted construction site, and emptied the box of rounds into the side of an orange port-a-john. Alex told Travis he was a natural marksman. This was Travis's first experience with a gun.

A few weeks later, Alex got Travis a job in the city with a friend who owned a car wash. It was a good job. The boss paid cash every day, and there were good tips. About two years later a tall, well-dressed man named Frank Baxter drove his black Cadillac into Travis's wash bay. He was friendly and generous, so Travis was surprised when he noticed his boss's trepidation regarding Frank. In fact, Frank elicited a reaction of such anxiety from all the guys at the car wash that Travis was immediately intrigued by him. They called him the Carpenter, but only after he'd left, gossiping like schoolgirls. The boss never charged him a dime. After that, Frank came to the car wash just about once a week. Turns out he was fresh off a seven-year stint in a federal prison, something about a bank robbery. Travis figured the nickname had something to do with it too, though he never asked the guys. But each time Frank came to the car wash, Travis made sure to be the one who washed his car, and he always did an immaculate job. Travis figured any man who could intimidate a group of grown men without saying a single word was



definitely on the way to something big. So he made it his goal to get to know Frank, and eventually one day, work for him.

“Tastes good, doesn’t it?” Frank said. “We have talented growers, Javier especially. He lived in Cuba you know, worked in one of those big cigar factories outside Havana. It’s amazing what can be accomplished with the right people. The basics of running this town are very simple. All you need to do is reward those with something to offer, and the way to recognize them is that they can do something you can’t; it’s that simple. And when you identify them, you protect them with the meanest bastards you can find. You assure them they can’t protect themselves. And everyone in the middle will aspire to become one or the other, and those who don’t will know their place and fall in line. Because the weakest should never be allowed to make the rules, only follow them. And that, Travis, is all you need to know about running this place. Remember that, and you’ll never go wrong. That’s what these priests don’t understand. They’ll never understand that we need bad men to protect the town, the system. The priests think this whole community fell out of the sky one day, conjured up in their asinine prayers. They say I’ve created a fear that doesn’t exist, but let them try to run it their way; see what happens if those gates are left unguarded for a day. The people forget that I created this community in the shadow of the world out there. If they think it’s bad here, they don’t know a thing.”

It was true what Frank said, that South Town was paradise compared to the outskirts, but the priests were charismatic in a way that Frank wasn’t. In all of Frank’s calculated moves he neglected to think about what would happen when the people in the middle no longer aspired to become one or the other, when they’d had enough of simply falling in line. The priests had

thought about it; it was the root of their plan. If history was full of any such examples, there was none more plentiful than the angered class and their rallying cry of equality.

The priests made a person believe that a better way of life was possible, and their momentum was growing, the people in the middle beginning to figure out just how powerful their numbers could be. It was imperative that Frank shift the focus. He couldn't allow the priests any more leeway. Father John even had Travis talking too much, but Travis didn't want to think about that. He wasn't a rat; Father John just had a way. Travis couldn't explain why he buckled in the priest's presence, or why he kept coming back to confess sins that later on he felt were not sins at all. He hadn't yet said anything to Father John that really mattered, but sooner or later, the priest would ask for something in exchange for all that listening. Travis didn't like that Father John knew things about him that nobody else did, least of all Frank. Frank was like his father, and one never confesses to their father. He is always the last to know, appealed to at the moment of ultimate weakness, when there is nowhere else to turn.

"Anything on the market incident?" Frank asked.

Travis told him about the conversation he'd had with the vendor, but Frank was already distracted, partially listening. The hard drive was the only thing on his mind now.

"Just some loner, a crazy wandered in from the outskirts," Travis said. "Called himself Anton. Name mean anything to you?"

"No," Frank said, "It means nothing."

"What's on the hard drive?" Travis asked.

Frank smiled with that crocodile grin Travis remembered from the car wash, curving around his face in a perfect wrinkle. "Let me worry about that for now."

## 29. Satellites

It was warm and sunny, drifts from the previous day's snowfall melted on the tunnel's asphalt walkway. It felt like early spring though it was early winter, a threshold day that begins cold but ends beautiful, a day that doesn't know what it wants to be.

Harry's jacket was unzipped, the first two buttons of his Hawaiian shirt undone, and the sun was beating on his chest. His shiny gold chain reflected its light. "It's a hard drive," he said. He took a sip of his cider, watching the people walk past him.

Harry regarded all people with skepticism, part of the reason he rarely left his cathedral. Today, however, he emanated a confidence and ease that Simon hadn't seen in years. He had even suggested they go for a walk, and the sun seemed to brighten his spirits, lifting the seeping gloom accumulated from weeks inside his dark cathedral room.

"I know it's a hard drive," Simon said. "But what's it for?"

Harry grinned. "You won't believe it." He crossed the street to avoid the shade from a high building, threading his way between the myriad of people and tables stacked with produce. He stopped abruptly in the busy walkway, nearly spilling his drink on a tidy pyramid of potatoes, and put his big hand on Simon's shoulder. His eyes were piercing, clear as Simon had ever seen them. "If my source is correct, it could change everything."

"Yes?"

The crowd bumped and jostled them, anxious for the fresh produce.

"It's a link to a satellite in space."

"That's not possible," Simon said.

When Simon was a child, there were many modes of communication: radio, telephone, internet, and he'd always believed that if people ever communicated over long distances again, it would happen in the simplest of ways. Perhaps a radio signal transmitted across the land, picked up by small, handheld radios like the yellow wind-up one he kept under the floorboards in his apartment and used to wind weekly, always hoping that one day he'd hear a broadcast from across the river telling him everything would be alright. But that had never happened. He'd never heard a sound beyond the eternal grainy static, and had stopped winding it years ago.

But a satellite? Such a thing had never crossed his mind. It was too improbable.

"It's true," Harry said. "So I heard."

Simon looked at the sky, past the tops of the buildings and trees and everything else, trying to see even further, past the blue, to that place where the blue gives way to black, and tried to imagine a satellite. It had been so long since he'd thought of anything like that, mechanical things, but slowly an idea began to surface. First, a tin can, speeding past the bright blue of the planet, cresting the blackness of space dotted with millions of stars like the backdrop of a dream. It sprouted metallic butterfly wings, then solar panels and long, flexible antennae. Soon it had the colourful markings of agencies and countries long defunct. He thought about his history text books, and about Sputnik, Russians. There were thousands of satellites in space, still up there now, floating around the earth. Some would die and crash back to the earth in brilliant fireballs. Others would remain forever; these were called space debris. He remembered seeing a sketch of a section of earth and all the satellites that were conceivably there. Thousands of them, each with a singular purpose and mission, programmed, launched, left to die. Floating like mosquitoes in a wash basin. The world had communicated through satellites. Infinite signals were broadcast in this way.

It was strange to be thrust into a place of great distance when all Simon had ever known, since he was as a teenager alone in the city, was immediacy. Now, in seconds, his past opened up. The dust-up of a world so gone, so forgotten it was as dead to him as the family, the childhood he left behind. He used to wonder if he dreamed that past life. Now, he remembered things with stunning clarity and vibrancy, as though a long-hanging veil had been lifted from his eyes. Everything seemed clearer and sharper. He realized why Harry was in such good spirits.

They walked slowly towards the cathedral, where people were gathered on the steps awaiting Father John's sermon.

"How did Fisher find it?" Simon asked.

"It was on a computer in the city. Fisher's men have been exploring over there, crossing the river in groups. I knew that, but I didn't know what they were looking for. I guess he knows exactly what to look for: the things that will give him an edge, the old technologies. He found an abandoned military installation and parts of it still had goddamn power reserves, solar. They fired it back up and some computers came to life. The hard drive was on one of them."

"And they got it out fast."

"The city's too dangerous. They figured they could get it back to North Town and work with it from there, until you stole it."

"Do you know what's on it?"

"No. Must be something big, though. It's a satellite, bound to have answers even if we don't like what they are. So you see why Frank was so keen on it, why he's paying you double once he gets it working, why he's trying to recruit you."

So Harry knew about the extra money. "What do you mean, once he gets it working?"

"Goddamn thing is locked."

“Locked?”

“Fisher’s men locked it before they removed it from the city, and Frank’s techs can’t hack it. The courier must’ve had the password. Which means the only way to get it open is to get the code from the courier.” Harry looked closely at Simon. “When you did the job, were you alone, or was Travis Parker with you?”

Simon thought back to the job, laying on the gravel esker in the cold, the walk through the North Town market, the courier James and the seamless switch, and through it all Travis and Dan warm inside Baxter’s safe house. “No, I was alone. I couldn’t have done it with them.”

“That’s what I thought. So you know what that means, then.”

“They’ll need me to find him.”

“Because you’re the only one who knows what he looks like.”

The revelation hit Simon hard. He needed time to think through Frank’s offer, explore all the angles and details, that was how he worked. Every decision in his life, each of his jobs, revolved around the details, everything planned and accounted for. But sure as night would come, Travis Parker would be at his apartment this very moment, telling him the job isn’t done until Frank says it is. They’d be going back to North Town tomorrow, and Simon would have no choice but to obey.

“The satellite will change everything,” Harry said. “The dynamics here, the way we live, a source of power for whoever controls it. Are you sure you want to be a part of that, knowing now what it is?” His eyes were unflinching, the way they’d always been but younger, resembling the man Simon knew years ago.

Simon remembered the woman from the alleyway, saw her hardened, defeated expression like she was in front of him now. There was no one there to help her. She was helpless to the

world of Frank Baxter, the machine that had been turned on and couldn't be stopped—a cold extension of something inorganic. The woman became Eva, alone in her North Town apartment. She was twenty kilometers away, and Simon couldn't help her if she needed him now. Her life was as precarious as the whims of murderers set loose upon the towns like a plague, as precarious as any person who was weaker than the weakest of Frank Baxter's thugs.

More and more lately he thought about Eva. He saw her beauty in every woman in South Town, from the tunnel market to the cathedral steps. He saw her in the poor and the despondent, felt her strength and wisdom like she was there with him, guiding him. But a woman, a family, was a liability. The evidence was there on the cathedral steps, the fathers who couldn't feed their wives or children, couldn't keep them healthy. He was frightened of the responsibility of loving her, if loving her meant being with her in this place.

He knew what he needed to do. And although Simon trusted Harry with his life and would confide in him many things, he knew better than to underestimate Frank Baxter's powers of coercion. For that reason alone would never tell Harry about Eva.

Simon said, "I don't know, Harry. Either I do it and perpetuate his world, or I run like hell, but I can't refuse him."

"No, you can't refuse him."

"So this is your game changer, then?"

"I think it is."

They reached the cathedral and Harry walked to the side entrance while Simon stood near the steps watching the growing crowd of people, a few dozen of the poorest anticipating the arrival of Father John.

It was the cathedral's staying power that struck him most. Buildings crumbled all around, but the stone cathedral, that was nearly six hundred years old, stood. It had endured everything that had ever happened, and as during previous times of turmoil, was the one place that held the community together.

There was reversion all around him, medieval simplicity. Communities had grown, peaked, perished and come full-circle, neat and tidy and definite and now this: a wrench in the engine of reversion, the engine wants to start. Frank Baxter has found technology and he wants to turn it on. It only took him fifteen years.

What the satellite held was uncertain. But what it represented was a past that the people had tried to forget, been forced to live without, and it didn't seem fair that it was being thrust upon them now.

Above, somewhere among the thousands of satellites and space-debris orbiting the planet, there was one instrument tuned to the world of South Town, aimed at a smallish piece of metal and plastic that defied access, waiting patiently for a signal from its long-dead earthly masters. Maybe it held a message from a community across the world who'd survived the fall as well. Maybe everywhere else life went on without them, and they were just the unlucky ones, forgotten. Maybe somewhere up north his parents were still alive.

Father John stepped through the grand doors and a hush fell over the crowd. His simple brown robe and leather sandals displayed a humble sort of pride that each individual in the crowd could relate to. His voice was loud and commanding, steady, as he walked to the edge of the stairs, spread his arms wide, and began.

"I see many faces here that I know well. New ones too, and I thank each one of you for coming out today to hear a few simple words from a man one in the same with you. For your



struggles are my struggles, and if we work together and recognize the signs of God, we will prevail. Let the heat of today's sun be a reminder that always after coldness comes warmth. And as we ready for the coming winter, which we know will be our hardest yet, we should all take refuge in the idea that each winter has a spring, and each summer has a fall, and where one peaks, another descends. Such is the way of nature, such is the way of God. Take heed, my friends, that our spring is on the horizon . . .”

## 30. Flight

“You are a simple man, Max Gray, this I have heard about you. I can see it in your simple house, your farm. I can see it in the way you are sitting across from me now. So tell me, how did such a simple man with simple tastes allow his only son to get caught up in such bad deeds?”

Dmitri sat across from Max and Simon in the small kitchen, the afternoon sun beating through the window, onto the side of his face. His button-down shirt was open over his neon blue nylon shorts and sandals, giving the impression of a man who has spent the morning surfing. Beside him was the other man from outside the St. Petersburg, who said nothing, staring across the table at Max. Simon tried to look at them, but couldn't meet their eyes, instead looking through the kitchen window at Dmitri's dust-covered BMW.

“It's not what I want for him, not how I raised him. I made him be here for this so that he might learn something about what it means to be a man.”

“And what is that?”

“That a man faces his problems.”

Dmitri nodded solemnly. “And where is your wife?”

“She's not here. Just me and the boy.” Max sighed. “I know you mean to kill him, I've heard what happened. But I propose to make it right. How much did he steal?”

“You have balls, Max Gray,” Dmitri smiled. “Calling me here to negotiate, your son sitting beside you. I'm not completely surprised; a man always shows what he's made of when it concerns his family. But unfortunately for you and your son, it's not a question of money. We retrieved the money. The problem lies in our ability to save face. You see, word of this has reached the street. Our competitors know what occurred. This is my type of business, people are always watching. How will I look if I let your son go?”

“I understand your concern,” Max said. “But you’ll like what I have to say. How much?”

“Fifteen thousand dollars is what your son stole from me.”

“Fifteen thousand for the life of two boys.”

Dmitri shrugged. “I know, but this is the business I work in.”

“Your business, that’s why I called you here. You Russians are buying up lots of property in Kerala, so you know that the value of real estate is going up and up. I bought this land thirteen years ago for twenty thousand. Last time I checked, it was worth twice that. It’s not on the ocean, but its close enough. The highway is a stone’s throw away, and the city is only a few miles from here. It’s a great spot to build a hotel, bigger than those single storey ones you guys have along the water. I’m talking a dozen storeys, valets, restaurants, sky’s the limit.” Max took an envelope from the table and slid it across to Dmitri. “So here’s what I propose: this envelope contains the deed to my property. You’ll never find ten acres for sale this close to the city and the ocean. It’s a great opportunity. I will sign it over to you now, and my family will leave Kochi today. You will never see us ever again, you will never hear from us, and we will never talk about what happened, that I can promise. Simon’s debt to you will be paid. You take the land, tell your people whatever you want, you made an example of us. Your competitors will believe what you tell them. That is my offer.”

Dmitri looked out the window at the rows of potato plants that began from the edge of the gravel driveway and continued to the tree line fifty meters away. “Ten acres,” he said. “When I asked people about you they said you were a man of your word, a reliable man. This I respect. My father taught me that a man’s word is everything. What did your father teach you?”

“My father taught me how to kill bears.”

Dmitri laughed. “To kill bears. There are not many bears here in India, are there?”

“Not the kind I’m used to. So do we have a deal?”

Dmitri tapped the table with his fingertips. He looked out the window again, then at the man beside him. “It is an interesting offer, but this property is worth twenty thousand and no more. Only real estate along the ocean appreciates so much, so I will need something else from you.”

“What?”

Dmitri leaned across the table. “You don’t leave Kochi today, you leave *India* today, and you never return. I can’t risk that you might be seen when you are supposed to be dead. Remember this too: I can just as easily kill your son, Max, but I’m feeling generous today.”

“My son is stealing from tourists on the boardwalk. Maybe leaving India will be good for him. We have a deal. We’ll leave today, and never return.” Max looked at Dmitri with an intensity Simon had never seen before, his deep-set, squinting eyes unafraid of the Russian or his bagman, emanating strength that Dmitri seemed to appreciate. “You heard that I am a man of my word, so let me say this: we will never speak about this to anyone, we will know nothing. All I want is the life of my son, and I will give you everything we have to make this happen. But if you come at me, Dmitri, if you try to find us and kill us, I will be ready. I will think about this moment every day for the rest of my life, and I will be ready for when you come. That is a promise. That is my word.”

Dmitri stared at Max, hands folded on the table in front of him, and after a long while a smile began to form on his lips. “I’m beginning to like you, Max Gray,” he said, as a breeze came through the kitchen and his shirt fluttered.

The BMW drove away down the long driveway, obscured by a trail of yellow dust, past the many rows of vegetables Simon and his father would see for the last time today. Max stood

at the window until the car disappeared, the handle of his Colt revolver sticking out of the back of his pants.

Simon looked at his dad, wanting to tell him that he was sorry for everything. He stared at the revolver, which his dad practiced with every now and then, emptying rounds into a plank stuck into the garden with a target drawn in magic marker. "Would you have done it?" Simon asked.

Max turned from the window, the dirt-filled lines and wrinkles of his brown face prominent in the afternoon light, and for the first time in his life Simon saw in his father something other than the humble farmer. He was a strong man, a powerful man whose words meant something, and Simon knew without a doubt that his father would have killed both Russians if things had gone differently.

"We have to go now," Max said. "Your mother's at the train station with our tickets."

"Where will we go?" Simon asked.

"To the cabin, son, where else?"

### 31. Beauty

What is beauty, thought Anton. Is it the way something ought to look in the most ideal situation, untainted by the outside world? Is it perfection, and how would he recognize it if he saw it? Would somebody be there to tell him, or would he know it innately, the way he knew the ugliness of a human soul.

Anton had a gift. He could always tell a bad person from a good one, a talent that had manifested during the fall and followed him ever since like a passenger in a side car, a colourful scarf flapping in the wind. There were no auras, no visions, nothing so romantic. Only a gut feeling that came from deep within. Sometimes, if the energy was strong enough, he could tell from a distance, like those men in the market whose evil hovered like a chemical cloud. But he could always tell with a look in the eyes. It gave him comfort to know for sure.

Beauty, however, was something Anton had never known. He'd never seen a work of art, or a woman so striking he wanted to hold her. He didn't see families, he saw survivors. There were no homes, only shelters. He wondered if he perceived things this way because of how the world was now, if he was a product of his surroundings, a man adapted to survive. Anton remembered his brother telling him about Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, and he wondered if he'd developed his skill in response to the world outside. He wondered if beauty had a definition before the fall, something that could be repeated. Was it simple like a flower, with colours like a rainbow? Or was it more complicated than that? How would he know for sure? Who would tell him?

One thing Anton knew was that his brother had beauty in him. He'd wanted good things for everyone, never wanted to hurt anybody. He'd believed that all people were capable of

kindness, and if given two paths to follow, the majority would choose the good one. He'd believed that humankind was inherently altruistic, and that was his mistake.

Anton was only a boy when they murdered his brother, but from that day he knew he'd never trust another human being again. He'd never allow himself to make the same mistake his brother had. After the shot echoed through the neighbourhood and his brother lay dead and Frank Baxter told him, calm as ever, to come out from where he was hiding, that everything would be alright, Anton ran as fast as he could to the one place he knew Baxter wouldn't look for him—across the river. He would take his chances in the ramshackle city where the water hadn't fully receded and the gangs patrolled for sustenance like dogs.

Once in the city, the brutal reality was sobering. Anton realized that the only way for a boy to survive was to not be there at all, so he became invisible, living on top floors of office towers and condos, a quiet vulture on a high perch. Through his binoculars, he watched them kill and eat each other and scrounged their leftovers under night's cover. During the day he slept in short increments, and he never spoke. He was, like the thriving rats, a creature of darkness.

In his hiding places the hours passed slowly, and he spent his time surveying the big picture down below. This self-imposed, roughed-out education of a crumbled society became his obsession. He watched the gangs outmanoeuvre each other, learning something of strategy and group dynamics. He studied the behaviour of individuals and learned how to figure people's intentions before they acted. A man with killing on his mind, Anton observed, will behave a certain way, and he catalogued their tells. He realized that there were bad men and there were survivors. There were men like his brother and men like those who had murdered his brother. But he came to accept that in the city, what ruled above all else, was the hunger.

On days when his appetite seemed limitless, he would think of his brother's simple gardens and greenhouses, the people that had been dependant on him for survival, and how all of it was now in the hands of another man. Anton had seen enough of Frank Baxter to know that sooner or later, everything his brother had worked hard to create would turn to the same pile of shit he witnessed on the streets below. Given enough time, greedy men will ruin everything they touch.

Anton's gift, his "evolution," he blamed on Frank Baxter. He thought that if he didn't kill Frank soon he might evolve further, and he was afraid of what that might mean. From the moment his brother was murdered, Anton's whole life was like an arrow pointing back to South Town and his moment of revenge. He hoped that when he killed Frank he would find some clarity, that Frank's death would set him free of vengeance and allow him to recognize something beautiful for the first time since he was a child.

He wondered what that would look like.

The stairs that led from the sidewalk to Simon Gray's apartment had been hidden in shade for most of the day and were still covered in snow, showing no footsteps. From an abandoned second floor space, Anton watched the apartment and also Dan who was across the road sitting on a small porch. The moonlight was shining full on him; he made no attempt to hide.

Anton shivered in the crisp air. Down below, the puddles from the day's melt were freezing again, forming crunchy ice and slush that would be difficult to navigate quietly.



Anton wasn't in the habit of rushing things; one thing he was truly exceptional at was waiting. But he had a feeling. Sure as he could see Dan's badness from across the road rising like steam, he had a feeling about Simon Gray.

### 32. Why I Kill

“I can’t forget it,” Travis said. “I don’t know how to make it right.”

Father John’s brow was furrowed, his face taut and pink, flushed with blood. He leaned forward into his hands, thick fingertips at his temples. The candles on the altar seemed to be coming out of his back like the spikes of an ancient creature. His eyes flickered with the transient wicks. “Why this one, above all others?”

“Because it was different,” Travis said.

“Because he was an innocent?”

“Nobody is innocent.”

“Nobody at all?”

“Children, some women, but not the men. Everyone pretends, everyone has killed. Even you Father, or else you wouldn’t be here. But murder is murder, right? Tell me, you’re the expert. No, what made that one different was that I had a choice. Every time since, there was no choice. I’ve killed to protect this town that we take for granted. There are no more innocents, but back then there were idealists, and that’s why I can’t let it go.”

“He was an idealist?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“He had a vision.”

“A vision that ran counter to Frank’s?”

“Yes.”

“And you killed him because of it.”

Travis remembered the moment well, the fear and afterwards, pride. He was young and everything Frank said he ate it up word for word. In those early days they had connected without words, back in the city before the fall when they still called Frank the Carpenter, and after they'd crossed the river. Travis remembered how Frank's eyes would flash whenever he talked about a job, like it was a secret between the two of them. He hadn't seen that look for years until the other day when Frank was talking to the kid. He recognized it like a spark come back from the dead.

Father John said, "That doesn't sound so different from the way things are now. Frank has a heavy hand, you've always been his second. You've been under his thumb for as long as you can remember. Your world has no meaning without him. You ended any chance of that with this murder you can't forget."

Travis looked at the floor, afraid to meet the priest's eyes, unwilling to admit anything.

"It's not the killing, Travis, which gets you down. Some people are born into things, and all it takes is a spark and there it goes. People become what they were always meant to become. I was meant to be a voice for God; the fall taught me that. We're not so different, you and I. Not so different at all."

He put his hand on Travis's shoulder. "I can make it stop, Travis, all of it: the faces outside the cathedral, the guilt. I can make it all go away. I can see it in their eyes, just like you said. The people want revenge. Fifteen years of Frank's tyranny and you were beside him for all of it. They'd string him up tomorrow if they could, you too. I can't save him, but I can save you. Sometimes there are reasons to kill, this I know. There's still hope for you."

"How?"

“This is the path you need to take now, the one you’ve been putting off. I’m giving you a chance at redemption, Travis.”

Travis had wondered when Father John would finally bring it up, how many more meetings before the priest summoned the courage to ask what he wanted to ask all along. It was true that Father John spoke of things he didn’t fully understand, but that was his gift—the words themselves, delivered with such conviction that Travis felt no other inclination but to believe them completely. And at that moment Travis realized that Frank didn’t stand a chance against Father John, not in the long run. He could hold out for awhile, but eventually Father John would win over all the people of South Town. But to gain the allegiance of Frank’s men—the men who had the guns—he needed Travis’s help, and he would say anything to get it.

Travis admired the priest’s certainty and thought that this was the kind of man he could work for. But Frank still ran the town, and Travis knew that whatever decision he made had better be the right one. It was Frank who told him once that a man on the wrong side of history is a man as good as dead.

Father John looked at him for a long moment. He sat up straight and lifted his chin, his humility fading and in its place formed the confidence and poise that he summoned when addressing the crowds: his winning balance of pride and humility.

“We’re so close, Travis,” he began. “All we need is a person on the inside. Help us and I promise I’ll make you a hero to the people. We’ll tell them that you saw the light, that you’ve been reborn. It will be so powerful. What better way to solidify the power of the cathedral than by showing the rebirth of Frank Baxter’s right hand man. Give us Frank and I’ll make you my right hand man. We need you, Travis. I know that everything you feel inside is because of him. The killing that haunts you, Frank made you do it. He made you what you are. Get rid of him and

your head will clear, just like before you met him. Do you remember who you were then? This is your only chance at redemption, your only opportunity to do what's right. There are plans waiting on you."

"Why me?"

"Only you. You're closest to him and you doubt him, and his men will follow you. We have other men in play, we have the support of the people, and now we need you."

"I don't believe in God."

"That doesn't matter; Frank is our main concern. After, we can talk about your faith."

"I can't just give him to you. I can't be so obvious."

"So what can you give us?"

Travis leaned back in the pew. He felt a cool draft on the back of his neck as the cloudless winter night took hold outside. Inside the nave, a few candles seemed a fruitless remedy to the bitter weather growing colder now each night.

"I had the men move the wood away from the cathedral," he said. "It was Frank's order, but I got it done," He watched the flames glimmer on the altar, the shadow-play on the great wooden crucifix. "All these years I've done his dirty work. He sends me with the guns and the men while he just sits in that fucking building. I've killed for him more times than I can count, and he won't even look at me anymore. He's gone soft. Fifteen years ago he would've taken you out without a question, now he thinks he can outsmart you. He's worried about Fisher when he should be worried about you. I've told him, but he won't listen to me."

"He's never appreciated you, Travis."

"But he gets things done. He used to anyway. What about you? How would you do it different? God won't protect this town, it takes men with guns to do that."

Father John nodded. "And who better to lead them than you."

"I want to be more than just the muscle."

"You will be."

And there was Father John's offer, clear as the night sky: betray Frank, turn the men, secure the guns and ammunition, and Father John would call him a hero. Travis believed Father John when he told him he could make his pain go away, that giving up Frank would free him of his guilt; it made perfect sense. But there was a part of Travis that was tied to Frank and would be forever, and he was hesitant to give his allegiance too quickly to the priests who were, despite all their successes, a gamble. Father John could talk, but did he have the strength to make the decisions imperative to the survival of the town? Travis needed to be sure of the priest's mettle.

Then he had an idea. If Father John needed him so desperately and was already making plans based on his allegiance, then it was clear that the priests needed him more than he needed them. So Travis would make Father John earn his loyalty, make him shoulder some of that killing they'd talked about for so many nights. And then he'd see what this priest was made of.

"What do you know about information?" Travis asked.

"What kind of information?"

"The kind that comes from the sky."

Father John looked at him, puzzled.

"Satellites, Father, I'm talking about satellites."

### 33. Simplicity

“I’ve been thinking about your cabin,” Eva said. “How you told me your parents lived independently. How did they do it?”

“We hunted and fished, and we had a big garden with many different crops. We’d store vegetables in the cellar for the winter, and freeze our meat. With the small amount of money my parents earned, we bought clothes and supplies. It was a simple life. It’s funny when I look back on it, because it’s so similar to the way we live now, except it was peaceful.”

She looked at him. “It sounds wonderful. What would you need to survive there now?”

“I have mostly everything I’d need to get there and start over, except the one thing that will ensure long-term survival. You can hunt and gather for only so long before supplies start to dwindle. I would need seeds, lots of seeds, for real chance of survival. The right crops will grow there, and over time, I could scavenge materials to build a greenhouse, and there’s the root cellar, if it’s not washed out.”

She walked to the kitchen and retrieved a small plastic bag from the counter. “I thought you would say that.” She handed him the bag. “Here.”

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A seed potato. Enough for a few plants. It’s a start.”

He took it from the bag and held it, amazed at its pristine condition. The careful control of the gardens and greenhouses ensured Baxter and Fisher’s power more than anything else. Seeds were never sold or distributed in the markets, and to possess them was a serious transgression. “It’s in perfect shape. How did you get this?”

“I work in Fisher’s greenhouses. The one thing I have access to is seeds, all kinds. There are so many I’m positive no one would notice if I took some.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I want to help you. I can help you get out of this place.”

He shook his head. “Even you have to buy your food in the market. It’s too dangerous. If they catch you, they’ll kill you.”

“I can get away with it. They trust me, Simon. I know how to do it. You’re not the only one who knows how to steal.”

“Please, I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Let me help you,” she said. “I want to help you.”

She turned away from him, and he caught her faint, musky odour. He touched the back of her neck, felt her thick, soft hair between his fingers, on the back of his hand. “I love your smell,” he said.

Eva laughed. “No you don’t. It’s unattractive.”

“Maybe before people thought like that, but not now. It’s you, it’s real.”

She looked small and vulnerable with the wool blanket draped around her shoulders. He kissed her neck, tasting her sweat. He kissed her breasts and her scent became stronger and he wanted her then and there. He touched between her legs and she was already wet, a dewy coolness clinging to her canopy of coarse hair. They made love in front of the fireplace, the heat on their naked bodies like sunshine from a hot August day.

The sheet, pulled over her breasts, moved rhythmically with her breathing. Her hair smelled like smoke and he breathed it in. Her place was warm, and he flicked the sheet off. He turned and the movement must have jostled her, waking her from her light sleep. She put her



head on his shoulder and he held her close. The cold wind whistled against the window as they watched the shadow-play from the fire dance on the stucco ceiling.

“Do you have to leave now?” she asked

“Frank’s men will be looking for me. I don’t want them to start looking too hard.”

“Why are they looking for you?”

He didn’t answer. She was the only person in the world he couldn’t mislead with a look or a few words. Maybe it was why he’d fallen for her.

“Are you in trouble?”

“There was a problem with the last job I did.”

“What is it? What aren’t you telling me?”

“I can’t tell you. I don’t want to put you in danger. Nobody knows about you, but still, the less you know the better. These men I deal with don’t care who they hurt. I’m sorry; I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She got out of bed and walked to where she’d left her clothes in a rough pile. Simon looked at her pale body, her flushed cheeks, soft curves, her small, perfect breasts and the tiniest hint of a belly that brushed against him when they were close. He watched her careful movements, as she slowly put her clothes back on, taking her time, her back to him. She bent, lifted her leg, stretched her arms, arched her back—everything Eva did was deliberate, Simon knew. She wanted him to stay the night.

“Don’t be sorry; I understand. I know your heart is in the right place, I can’t fault you for that.”

“I wish it was, Eva. I’ve done things I’m not proud of.”

“We all have. But I know that deep down you’re good. You can pretend for them, this act you’ve cultivated since the fall, the man you say you’ve become, but you can’t hide from me. I see the bad men in this town, and I know you’re not like them. You’re everything they aren’t. You see beauty in things, possibilities. You want to build something, be a part of something. Maybe someday you can tell me what won’t tell me now.”

He nodded. But the satellite was the one thing he wanted to keep from her.

Eva had told him that people had good in them, that all they needed was a guiding force, some sort of happening. He’d said that the happening already happened—it was the fall. And she’d answered that it’s only partly done, that the best was yet to come. He liked it when she talked like that.

To Eva, the fall was a cleansing. She believed that in the right setting anything was possible, humanity could finally have a chance to thrive. She lived her life simply and full of hope, the same way his parents had, and the satellite would only kick-start what they’d already had, a system and thought-process that was a proven failure. Simon knew this revelation would kill her, just as he knew they could never have a real relationship South Town. For Simon, a woman was a liability that could be used against him. It was bad enough he took these chances to be with her, but as long as he did what he did, and worked for the man who worked for Frank Baxter, he could never have a real life with her. But he felt different with Eva, freer, so much so that he wanted to walk away from everything else in his life—the practical things as she would call them. Eva saw practicality as a weakness and a chain to the past. So he decided take her where she wanted to go, because it was where he wanted to go too, and because he wanted her.

“But you look better than the last time you were here,” she said. “Not so distant.”

Simon thought about how Harry had looked when he told him about the satellite, as though the knowledge itself could change a person's physical appearance. "Because the cloud is lifting. I see myself now better than I ever have. I know I can't work for Baxter anymore. I've made that decision."

"I'm happy to hear that. So what are you going to do?"

He took her by the hand, and looked at her for a long moment. "You said you wanted to leave, that you would go anywhere. Leave with me, we'll go to the cabin."

She smiled. "Just like that?"

"Just like that."

She squeezed his hand. "I believe we met for a reason, Simon. I feel like I've always known you, and I trust you. I've never talked with anyone the way I have with you these past days. I was a girl when the fall happened, and I've never known feelings like this. You're the only person I've ever really talked to since my mother died. If there's one thing you and I are meant to do, it's get to that cabin and breathe some life into it. I find it sad that you have that place and it just sits empty, alone with its memories."

"So you will go?"

"Yes, I'll go."

He touched her face, feeling her heat, her light, the spark of her life. He felt alive in a way he hadn't felt in years. "Okay."

"And the seeds?" she asked.

"Are you sure you won't get caught?"

"I know how to do it. I'll take a little each day when I'm alone. There are so many they'll never know any are missing."

“Be sure before you do it, and be confident. If you appear hesitant or afraid, they will sense it and grow suspicious. Gather the hardiest seeds first, root crops we can plant early. They will be the most important, the cornerstone of our garden.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

He looked at her, wondering what it would be like by her side, feeling her light and heat for the rest of his life. He pictured them at the cabin, their children playing in the forest.

He remembered the tiny garden when his family arrived, and how it covered an acre by the second summer. The north was harsh, and they’d trucked in bags of black earth just to make the land fertile. He thought about his father’s .308 Husqvarna that had dropped many moose and bear, and eventually, his mind turned to the poor families on the cathedral steps, Frank Baxter, and the loners that populated the outskirts. And he hoped that no matter what happened when they were out there, he wouldn’t let her down.

She smiled, and kissed him. He unbuttoned her shirt, fingers traced between her breasts, down to her stomach, hip. His hand drifted further down, hard bone giving way to soft flesh, her dampness brushing his forearm. He thought about the cabin, his few memories that seemed impossible to grasp, a patchwork of imagery that blended into itself with no discernible boundaries, and he realized that she was as much a part of the cabin now as anything else was. In his mind’s eye they tidied it, revitalized it. They opened a window and blew life into it like a spring breeze.

## 34. The Proposition Pt. 2

In the open street the snow had cleared, but in the shade of the buildings that reached straight up from the narrow sidewalk, it was slower to retreat. Dan's footprints were like black holes, punched through the dirty-white mounds leading up the steps to the door of the apartment, beyond which Anton could make out a candle flickering behind a heavy curtain.

Anton looked across the street to the porch where Dan had been posted. He'd left about an hour ago and in that time Simon had returned home; not through the front door but another entrance not visible from the street, the only sign he was inside a faint candle light materialising with evening's onset. Anton figured that Dan had left to find something to eat and would be returning soon, which meant that Anton needed to get in and out quickly. At the very least, he needed to put out that candle.

He climbed the steps, testing for creaks and groans before stepping with his full weight. He pressed his ear to the door to listen for voices, anything to indicate that Simon wasn't alone, and for a second he thought that Dan was already inside, somehow finding his way into the apartment before him. But Anton dismissed this idea as quickly as it came, figuring there probably wasn't much about Dan that was surprising.

There was no sound from beyond the door. The street, too, was quiet. Simon's apartment was in a dodgy part of town, east of the tunnel and near the river, close to South Town's roughest bars. Most of the buildings were empty. It seemed that Simon wanted to be left alone, something Anton could relate to.

The knob was stiff but gave way after a quarter turn, and the door opened quietly. Anton pulled his gun and stepped inside.

Simon's place was spare, like nobody was living there at all, just how Anton expected it to look. The candle burned on a bookshelf, and on a coffee table laid an open hardcover book with a dog-eared left page. On the wall was a framed picture of a man and boy and a cart filled with bananas. The picture stood out on the grimy off-white wall and Anton walked over to it, drawn in by the brilliant blue sky and bright green banana plants. He studied the image, awed that a place like that could have ever existed. The man and boy looked happy and proud, and Anton thought about his brother.

He felt the gun at the back of his head. No mistaking its heaviness, the callous weight against his skull.

"Drop your gun," a voice said.

"I would, but then you'd shoot me," Anton said.

"I'll shoot you anyway, you so much as flinch. Scatter your brains all over this place. I'm not much for looks, it wouldn't bother me much."

"What about that?" Anton nodded to the picture.

"I'll aim away from it."

"Then those guys looking for you will hear the shot, and they will know you're home."

"But you'll be dead, so what does it matter to you?"

"Not much really, except I'd like to get from you what I came for before Dan finds you and brings you back to Frank."

"What did you say?"

"I said Dan is watching your place right now. He's gone for a bite I think, but if I could spot that candle from across the street, he'll be able to. He's dumb, but not that dumb. So can I talk? Because if you're just going to kill me, get on with it."

Simon didn't say anything for moment. Anton could hear his breathing, slow and steady. Then, Simon spoke. "I've never seen you before, what's your name?"

"The last person who asked me that is dead."

"Don't we all have a story. If you're looking for shit to take, look around, I don't have anything."

"I'm not robbing you; I just want to talk."

"You want to talk?"

"That's right."

"Seems like an odd way to talk to somebody, sneaking into his house with a gun."

"I only had the gun because I didn't know who else would be here."

"Not sure I can believe you."

"Let me put the gun down and don't shoot me, and you'll see."

"I'm not much for waiting and seeing. In my experience, things either are or they aren't. Gambling never works out for me. I like sure things."

"Sure things like working for Frank? As far as I can tell, he's got about a fifty percent chance of coming out on top, and I don't need to tell you those priests have about the same odds. I took a chance coming here to see you, so the least you could do is hear me out. If you don't like what I got to say, I'll leave and that'll be the end of it."

"So then what's your name? You want to talk, I want to know your name."

"Anton."

"It sounds familiar. What's your last name?"

"Just Anton."

"It still sounds familiar."

“It doesn’t matter. But it matters that I know who you are. I can’t talk like this, over my shoulder into the barrel of a gun. I’m going to put my gun down now, and sit in that chair right there. I’ll do it slow, okay?”

Anton felt the gun lift from his head. “Go on then,” Simon said.

Anton put his gun on the floor, sat in the chair, and looked at Simon. It was strange to be face to face with a person after watching him from a distance for so long. Like those men he’d watched from the buildings in the city, men who’d seemed like characters in a book or like manifestations of his own identity.

Simon sat on the coffee table opposite, keeping his gun on Anton, looking like a man willing to listen, but not forever. Simon had longish blond hair and a clean-shaven face and Anton guessed they were about the same age, though Simon probably looked younger than his years. It was his eyes that told on him. Wisdom accrues in the eyes and in scar tissue, both add elements that can’t be undone. Anton knew from those eyes that Simon would pull the trigger if he had to because a man had broken into his home and would have had it coming. Anton liked that about him.

“How do you know those things about me and Frank?”

“Because I’ve been watching Frank, then I started watching you. That could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how you look at it. The way I see it, you’ve got a choice here.”

Simon smiled but his eyes did not. “You’re right, the choice whether or not to put a bullet in your head right now.”

“I’m talking about something bigger, something much bigger. If you kill me, all you’ll have accomplished is killing me. What I’m proposing will outlive both of us. Let me tell you a



story. This story is about a ten year old boy, or maybe he was nine, I can't remember his age exactly. This boy had a brother who was much older, older than you and I are now. And this brother had a plan that was so simple that it seemed crazy. The idea was a community where people would live together peacefully, where each person's contributions would be used by the whole community. In the brother's mind, there were no outskirts, no bad men. All were welcomed with open arms. His idea was that if people didn't protect themselves from one another, they might evolve into something better than what they'd already been. He thought that people were good at pointing out what made them different, that maybe it was time to think instead about what made them the same. Similarities, the older brother would often say, was what made the world go round. So after the water receded, he started his community and people came from across the river, nobody was turned away. As the community grew it became prosperous and was clearly on its way to somewhere good, it had an energy. Eventually, the people in the community began to trust one another and forget about the terrible things that had happened just few years before. There had been so much taking and dying, so much unravelling, it was good to see some kind of growth.

“Then a man came from the city. It was nearly a year after the water had receded, and the community was strong. He came with another man and at first they seemed harmless. People came and sometimes they moved on, but mostly they stayed, families always stayed. It was the same with the man and his friend; they saw the richness, the potential, and they wanted to stay. Early on, the brother recognized the man's restlessness—the way he preached about making things better, how he scorned the community's simple approach. The man had grand ideas, which is one thing, but he also had a fierce competition inside him and enjoyed causing turmoil. He was there only days and wanted to change things, and when the brother refused to listen he

got angry, stirred up the people in the community with speeches and rumours. So the brother made it clear that if the man and his friend were to stay, they needed to follow the rules and contribute the same as everyone else and not cause any trouble. He was wise to many things regarding this world, the way it was and the way it had become and had lived through mountains of *mierda* to get where he was, and he wasn't going to let one bad apple ruin what he had created.

“Now, this is the part of the story where the younger brother looks back and says to himself, what if? What if the older brother wasn't so welcoming? What if he had sneaked into the man's tent one of those first nights and cut his throat while he slept. But the simple fact is what's done is done and there's nothing that can change it. Two weeks later the man killed the older brother, blew his brains out on his porch. He took over the community and after a few months things were different. Eventually, the memory of the older brother was no more than a wisp in the air, almost like he never existed.” Anton paused, looking at the picture on the wall.

“Is any of this making sense to you? I'm sorry, I haven't spoken to anyone in a long time, I may have lost my touch. But it's necessary for you to have a clear picture. You have a gun in your hand, and I don't want you to shoot me. But now comes the moment of revelation, not for you but for me, where my gamble will either pay off or end my life. I'm either right about you or I'm wrong. So tell me now, which one is it?”

Simon leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He let his gun drop just a bit and it was no longer pointing at Anton but some place on the floor between them. Then he looked up, eyes searching the man across from him, wondering what he wanted. But you know what I want, Anton thought, you know exactly what I want.

“Are you going to tell me what happened to the boy?” Simon asked. “Where did he go when they murdered his brother? That’s you, isn’t it, Anton Vargas. Your brother was Marciello.”

## 35. Blood Red Line

“Over the wall, you’re on your own. The old man said it’s the same bar you met him in last time. That’s where you’ll find the courier. He likes to drink, so wait until he’s had a few, then bring him back to South Town. Should be an easy job for the two of you.”

The ground was covered in early morning frost. They crouched in the tree line off River Road about a kilometre from South Town, Travis looking nervous, not his usual calm self.

Frank must have upped the sense of urgency, and for what was on the hard drive Simon could understand why. The only thing worse than not having the hard drive, was having it and being unable to use it. Simon had known, even before Dan ambushed him outside his apartment, that he wasn’t going anywhere until the job was done.

Travis’s forehead glistened with sweat. He wiped it with the back of his hand. “Dan says he caught you leaving this morning, running.”

“Not running, Simon said. “Coming to see you. I want the money Frank promised me.”

“You run, we’ll find you. Send a tracker to the end of the world to bring you back, and you know what comes after that.”

“I have an idea, but I told you I wasn’t running. Dan could’ve knocked on my door anytime, instead of jumping me when I left. What about the money?”

“Come back with the courier and you’ll get your money. No courier and you’ll have bigger problems.” He turned to Dan, squinting into the eastern sunlight that filtered through the forest canopy. “I know you hate the kid’s guts, but you have to work with him. He’s the only one who knows what the courier looks like. But you run it. And Dan, don’t fuck up again. You stop to tie your shoe and if the kid don’t put one in the back of your head I will.”

Dan nodded, but he was glaring at Simon, letting him know who'd be boss over the wall. It was more than just another job to Dan, who had something to prove after the last time on River Road. The wound on his head had healed nicely, just a blood red line nestled in a buzz cut. Simon made sure to look at it, that Dan saw him looking at it.

"Bring him back to Frank's building," Travis said. "He's no use if he can't talk."

"Why do we need the courier?" Simon asked, knowing Travis would expect questions.

"Because Frank says we do."

"That's it, nothing else to go on?"

"You know all you need to know. Find the courier, bring him back alive. Simple enough, even for you, kid."

Travis stood, and the meeting was over. He smoothed the wrinkles from his jacket before walking through the maze of naked trees, their leaves strewn on the ground and covered in frost that muffled his steps. In seconds, he was gone.

Dan started in the opposite direction, and Simon was left alone squatting in the bush. A few paces away Dan stepped on a stick and the snap carried far and wide in the tranquil morning air. He turned to see what was keeping Simon, a grimace edging up the side of his face and close to the blood red line.

Simon stood, unzipped his fly and pretended to take a piss.

## 36. Over the Wall

Sitting at a table inside the bar was a trio of men resembling the pimp Rennie and his thugs. They were drinking and laughing, having a good time, but under the guise of liquid camaraderie was the violent edge Simon knew well. From his seat at the bar he watched them, waiting for one to snap and turn, for one thing he knew about this type of man was that he wasn't content unless inflicting some kind of hurt. They were men who would have been in the same kind of establishment, doing the same kind of shit even if the fall had never occurred. Men who thrived here.

While he watched the men, all he could think about was Eva alone in her apartment. More than anything else he wanted to be with her to protect her from such men. Simon had finally recognized what Eva had known all along: that hope only existed outside the towns.

Simon looked at Dan. "We might as well be looking for you."

It was loud in the bar. "Huh?" Dan said.

"He's got a scar like that one on your head. He's your size too, except he'll be wearing a green army coat."

Dan looked away without a word, the humor apparently lost on him. He scanned the place like an animal looking for its next meal.

Nothing about Dan was unassuming. Simon's first rule, to not be noticed, was broken the moment they walked into the bar and everybody noticed them. But Dan was a big man, and the men here knew he'd be a challenge. At the moment, there were no takers.

Simon waved to the bartender, but Dan shook his head. "No drinks," he said. Simon shrugged. So they weren't even going to try to blend in. A poor strategy but it was the only way

Dan did things. He relied too much on his size, an approach that would catch up with him sooner or later. Simon hoped that when it did, he would be far away.

After half an hour, there was still no sign of the courier. Dan was getting antsy, fidgeting and swivelling his head, while all around them the bar was filling up with men, the booze flowing like water. The room was muggy and smelled of unwashed bodies. Simon noticed that the three men had finally taken an interest in them, whispering amongst themselves, pointing. They were drunker now, and it was only a matter of time before they came looking for trouble.

Simon was calculating how long it would take for the bar to turn on them when James walked in, army greatcoat unbuttoned and caked with mud, swinging like a pendulum. He was bigger than most, and the other men took notice as he went straight for the bartender, wasting no time. The old man had been right about his drinking; James looked thirsty like an old dog.

Dan saw him, and looked at Simon for confirmation. Simon could feel Dan's anger rising with each passing minute, and sensed he had revenge on his mind. This was payback for River Road.

James drank one after another, all clear stuff. He didn't talk to anybody, just stared across the bar, gesturing with his glass when he needed a refill. After five drinks he got up to take a piss and the aura he entered with was gone, and when he walked across the room and out the back door he was just another drunk, and no one took notice.

"I'll follow him out back," Dan said. "You go out front and make sure it's clear."

"Too early," Simon said. "There are too many people. We should hold up somewhere outside, and catch him on the way home."

"Just do it," Dan growled, and he followed James out back.

Simon looked both ways down the moonlit street and saw that it was empty. He zipped his jacket to his chin and walked around the building. He approached the alleyway and saw the back door was open, the glow from inside the bar shining on the opposite building. He turned the final corner and saw James clear in the light, facing the wall, one hand resting on the brick above his head and the other on his cock, misguiding a stream of urine onto the bottom of his greatcoat.

Simon could see Dan's silhouette behind the open door, and nodded into the darkness. Dan pushed the door closed and the light was extinguished.

"What the hell," James said. "There's somebody takin' a piss out here." He turned to look with his hand still on his cock, and Dan came forward with a haymaker to the jaw. James swayed, the stream of urine stopping abruptly as his legs buckled and he fell forward, hitting his head on the brick wall on the way down.

Dan looked at the heap of a body, pleased with himself.

Simon was dumbfounded. "I thought the plan was to follow him home. What are we going to do now?"

"He was going back inside. I had no choice."

They heard voices from beyond the door.

"It's too early to get him over the wall now," Simon said. "We can't carry him down the street when people are still out."

"I had to do it. He would've gotten away."

"You said that already. Any second now somebody else is gonna come through that door. You gonna lay him out too?"



Dan didn't say anything. Simon wished he could leave him in the alleyway with the courier, let him take on the whole bar if he wanted to. But Simon didn't know North Town very well, and needed Dan.

The voices were getting closer, just on the other side of the door. Simon buried his shoulder into the door, pushing with all his weight, while Dan got ready for whatever might come through. The door pressed against Simon, but he held it closed, digging his heels into the concrete step, hoping the men on the other side didn't try to kick it open. After a few tries the men gave up, but Simon knew they'd be coming around the long way. Simon and Dan needed to get out of the alleyway, find a place to hide until the streets quieted down. He thought about the last time he was in South Town, and had an idea.

"The safe house, is it close?"

"Yes," Dan said.

"How far?"

"Not far, a few streets away."

"Good. We'll get him to the safe house and hold up until later. Which way?"

Dan pointed to the street where the alleyway ended. "We turn right."

Simon pulled his gun and walked toward the street, leaving Dan with the courier.

"What about him?" Dan called.

"I'm not the one who punched him out," Simon said. "You carry him."

## 37. The Safe House

Simon knew what Dan had in mind when he came up the stairs with the bucket of water in his hand. He thought about trying to stop him, but Dan had a look in his eye that said he was going to do what he was going to do no matter what Simon thought. The only way to stop Dan was by brute force, something Simon had no chance in hell at, not unless it was for keeps and he went for the soft parts like a goddamn jackal, and even then his chances were about the same.

The room was on the second floor of an empty house off South Town's main street. It smelled musty, like a window hadn't been opened in a long time. Candles flickered on the hardwood floor revealing evidence of the room's sordid past—faded garbage bags strung across the windows, greasy semi-circles of mopped up blood. In the middle of the room, James was out cold and tied to a wooden chair, his mouth gagged with a piece of material, which along with the chairs and rope was the only item in the room.

Dan dumped the bucket of water on James's head and James gasped, arching his back like he'd been pumped with two-thousand volts. He tried to lunge forward, but the ropes held him tight. He relaxed, focusing on the water as it flowed across the hardwood floor, and when he finally lifted his head to look at Simon and Dan, his eyes were calm, saying he'd been exactly where they were now, seeming even to be amused by the role reversal.

Dan stood over James with that same smile he'd had outside the bar. He was wearing the courier's military greatcoat; it fit him perfectly. "I'm going to take that gag out of your mouth because I need to hear you speak. If you yell, I'll break your nose and put the gag back on and watch you squirm. Ever try to breathe through a broken nose?"

James didn't answer. His t-shirt was soaked through and he clenched his gut against a chill. He looked like he was deciding whether to cooperate or just settle in for the inevitable beating, so Dan hit him in the ribs.

James winced, face glistening through sweat and cold water. Dan dragged over the only other chair in the room and sat across from him, looking at him for a long time before he pulled down the gag and said, "You're not afraid of me."

"No," James said.

Dan laughed hard and long, as though it was pent up in him for some time, as though he was expelling a demon. He held out his arms, turning his palms up, then down. "You know, I've never had a coat that fit this well." He came forward and punched James hard in the gut. It sounded like wood hitting drywall. The air rushed out of James's lungs, and he doubled over as far as the rope would let.

"I've been in this room before," Dan said. "That chair you're sitting in, look at the marks where the ropes have burned through the wood, look at the dried blood. You know how many times I've used that same rope to tie down a rat?"

James coughed, gasping for breath. He lifted his head, looked into Dan's eyes. "You're an amateur."

Dan's face flushed. He slapped James on the side of the head. "No, you're the one tied up." He slapped James again, so hard that James and the chair nearly went over. He pulled a hunting knife from a leather sheath on his belt. The blade was matte black; its sharpened edge glinted in the candle light as he hammered it into the floor between them.

"I need information," he said.

James spit red onto the floor. “If you’re going to kill me, put the gun to my head and make it quick. I had the drive when I got into town and someone lifted it in the market. I fucked up, there’s nothing for us to talk about.”

Dan looked confused, but Simon understood. “He thinks Fisher sent us,” Simon said.

“Not Fisher,” Dan said. “Baxter. It was us who stole it, now we can’t turn it on. Need the code to open it.” He pulled the knife from the floor, tested the edge with his thumb. “I need the code.”

James looked at Simon. “Was it you who took it?”

“Yes,” Simon said.

“In the market?”

Simon nodded.

“I never saw you. That fucking hard drive, they should’ve sent a team. But Fisher wanted to keep it quiet, thought we didn’t have any leaks. He doesn’t think that now. You’re good, I was never that good. The military don’t teach you how to steal, they teach you other things. Stealing is something you’re born with, like an artist. Anyone can practice, but true artists are born with talent.” He looked at Dan. “Aren’t they?”

Dan squeezed the handle of the knife, knuckles turning white. He was no artist, and even now with James tied up, he enlisted no respect. A man makes up his mind about another man within seconds of meeting him, and he rarely changes it. James had made up his and Dan could do nothing about it. But Dan could make him sorry, he could make him hurt. Dan was good at that.

He placed the knife on the floor, drew his arm back, and brought it forward with heinous power, hitting James square in the face. There was a snap of bone, and the chair went over.

James hit the floor head first, body weight crushing his neck. His nose was bent and bleeding, air bubbles surfaced and popped red on his lips, dribbled down his chin and onto the floor.

Simon went to lift him up but Dan grabbed him by the collar. "Don't touch him."

They watched James struggle for air, Dan's eyes wide with excitement. Simon knew what Dan was after, not just the code but redemption. He wanted to arrive in South Town and show Travis what he was capable of. Simon had seen that look in men's eyes before, and he knew that Dan would not stop until he got what he wanted.

Dan righted James in the chair, and sat across from him. "Let's try this again. Next time I'm going to cut off a finger."

James was breathing out of his mouth. He leaned forward and spit blood onto the floor. The rope had loosened when the chair went over, but Dan hadn't noticed.

"The code," Dan said.

"How do you know I even have it?"

Dan stood with the knife, squeezing it so hard it looked like his knuckles were going to pop.

Simon was sure he was going to cut him, and stepped between them. "You were the lone courier," he said. "It was locked when I lifted it from you. There's no other way."

"Maybe they gave it to me locked."

"Give it to him," Simon said. "Or this won't end for you."

"If I do, you'll kill me."

"Our orders are to bring you back alive. How would we know you're not lying?"

"So then I live until the hard drive is turned on."

“I’m not the one to make that decision, neither is he. Only Frank can. But if you don’t give it to us now, Dan’s going to make it worse for you. Either way you’re coming back to South Town. What happens to you there is undecided. Maybe Frank will like you, he’s a complicated man.”

James laughed. “You’re a good thief, not so much of a liar. If I go into South Town I’m dead, it’s just a question of how long I can put it off.”

“Don’t let him do this.”

Dan glared at Simon, looking like he might come at him once he finished with James, but Simon didn’t care. Dan had had his chance, and he was blowing it.

“Give us the code James, and I won’t let him torture you. When we get to South Town, I’ll tell Frank you cooperated. Maybe you’ve had it with Fisher. Maybe you have information Frank can use. He needs good people.”

James tried to laugh but winced instead as the pain tore through him. “Do you know what it is?”

“What?”

“The hard drive. Do you know what it is?”

“No.”

James smiled, fidgeting with his hands behind his back. “We live like we’re the last people on Earth, like there’s nobody watching us, our bloody sins. Before the fall I was a military man, taught to follow the rules, the code of honour. But there is no honour here, only evil. If he can see what’s out there, he’ll be unstoppable.”

“What do you mean, see?”

“Satelittes with cameras, military technology. Baxter will be able to see the world. Tell me, what chance would they have if they never saw him coming?”

“Cameras,” Simon said, and the word sounded archaic the moment he uttered it.

His eyes trailed instinctively up the wall to the ceiling. He pictured the boundary of the earth’s atmosphere, that place where the blue sky gives way to black, and imagined thousands of satellites, defunct and lifeless, speeding like a graveyard of capsized boats caught in a river’s current, migrating in their long arc of low-earth orbit, a controlled chaos of exact speeds and distances, never touching, never deviating, stuck forever in astronomical purgatory. And in this freeway of dead metal, one satellite remained alive, its red-eye blinking an unending pattern of code. Through all the shit it had watched quietly and without judgement, communicating data to an empty line.

The hard drive’s purpose was more important than Simon could have ever imagined. The abstract idea was now concrete and tangible, something to be respected, and in the hands of Baxter, feared. It would put him light-years ahead of anyone who dared cross his path, like Columbus meeting the Indians. It would be a bloodbath.

James also recognized this truth. In another time and place, he and Simon might have been great friends. But here they were enemies, however now united in one purpose: that the code never get to Baxter, that they do everything in their power to keep that from happening.

Simon looked at Dan and the blade, wondering what he was going to do next. But it wouldn’t be long now, they just had to hold out a little while longer. He looked at James, tried to convey this message without words, tried to be the light in the wake of Dan’s darkness. Just hold on he wanted to say, just hold on a little while longer.

But he was too late.

James buried his chin and lunged out of the chair. The rope was loose and he went for the knife, landing on Dan with all his weight. They stumbled and crashed to the floor, wrestling in a mess of ropes, flashes of blade and skin. Simon stood back, unable to tell them apart, waiting for a separation.

The knife slipped out of the melee and slid across the floor. They got to their feet, and James hit Dan in the ribs, then kned him in the groin. Dan doubled-over, hands between his legs, but came back with a strike to James's already broken nose. James cried in agony, face mashed, water pouring from his eyes. He drove his elbow into Dan's eye, connecting with a sickening pop. Blood cascaded down Dan's cheek.

They squared off in the middle of the room, catching their breath, looking so remarkably alike that Simon was mesmerized. It was like a man fighting himself. They circled and circled, looking for an opening, then attacked like wild animals, clutching at throats, going for eyes, neither man holding anything back.

Simon recognized Dan because he was wearing the military greatcoat. He pulled his gun and lined up his target just as Dan broke free, diving for the knife. James followed and Dan turned, getting the knife up just in time.

The knife stuck into James's chest, stopping him like he'd hit a wall. He looked vacantly at the black handle sticking out of his ribs as he fell to his knees. His eyes turned to Simon as his life ran out. Then he collapsed on the floor.

Dan wiped his eye and knelt, looking at the blood on his hands, James on the floor. "No code," he said quietly, face recoiling at the words. "No code."

He looked around like the code was hidden somewhere and he need only locate it. "No code!" he yelled, as the reality set in and he frantically searched James's pockets.



Finding nothing, he turned to Simon, wild eyes and the blood red line, looking so much like the man he'd just killed. "We're dead men," he said.

But Simon was looking at James. He didn't want him to die like that. He was sick of it all.

"Do you hear me? We're dead men."

"It doesn't matter."

"What?"

"The code. It doesn't matter. You were never going to deliver it to Frank anyway."

Dan stared at Simon, and as he began to grasp the meaning of Simon's words, his face contorted into ugliness. He stood, and Simon saw something in his look he didn't understand, would ever understand: contentment at the prospect of one final act of violence.

Dan took a step forward, looking at the gun in Simon's hand. "Put it down. We'll settle this like men."

But Anton was already behind him.

The blade thrust into Dan's back and his mouth opened like a fish's, bobbing open and closed, eyes blinking incoherently. He pulled it out and the candles shuddered as Dan collapsed beside James. The blood pooled between their two bodies, head to toe in perfect symmetry, indistinguishable but for the military greatcoat.

## 38. Informants

Harry sat across from Frank and Travis at the big oak table. He looked relaxed, as though it was the most natural thing in the world for Frank to be visiting him at the cathedral in the middle of the night.

“Informants,” Frank said. “I hate informants. I realize their necessity in this world, but the fundamental idea, that a man would betray the trust of his friends to further his own end, is unforgiveable. They should be executed on principle. Let them come to you and talk, they are always welcome to talk, but then they need to be gotten rid of. Because if a man does it once, he will inevitably do it again.”

A fire popped in the cast-iron wood stove that was loaded to the top, pumping out heat like a living animal. Travis could see the rich orange glow through cracks in the metal, seams where the old stove came together. He felt a bead of sweat on his forehead and wiped it off with his handkerchief. On the stove top, the aluminum coffee pot steamed, its lid rattling lightly.

Harry said, “Kind of late isn’t it, Frank?”

Frank was looking at the ceiling where the arches came together. “Nice place you have here. What do the priests charge you? Too much probably. I should have never given them the cathedral. But you can’t beat the atmosphere. It must get cold though when the temperature really drops. These stone walls must get covered in ice near the top, by the windows there. I bet you need to have a fire going at all times. I bet you get your wood from the pile in the square.”

He studied the room, focusing on the brick wall, listening for sounds from the other side, but there were none.

“Call me finished, call me whatever you want and I know you have. That doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t matter so much what a person says as what you know to be the true thoughts

ringing through his mind. And no matter what people say around here, I always know what they're thinking." He pulled a brown cigarette from the pocket of his white dress shirt, taking his time lighting it. "You knew about the hard drive. You knew it was locked."

Harry leaned back in his chair. He looked at the wood stove, the pile of split wood on the floor. "Hardwood," he said after a while. "You need your men to gather more hardwood. Spruce burns too quickly, that's why your piles deplete so fast."

Frank smiled. "I will keep that in mind."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Frank."

Travis looked at the cigarette in Frank's hand and wanted one, but it wouldn't do to ask. It would take away from the effect they were trying to put on Harry, the old routine they played—Frank the talkative easy-going one, Travis the quiet killer, though everyone in South Town knew the opposite was truer.

Harry was confident and cool, and on any other day Travis might have believed him. But he trod in too many different worlds, and that was the problem. Frank had finally had enough.

Frank took a long, deep drag. His gray hair matched the colour of the smoke. He squinted as the smoke snaked around his face. The wrinkles around his eyes were more pronounced, reaching back to his temples.

"We all know how it works, Harry. The exchange of information has always been there. I have no problem with that. You were good at what you did, and you always respected the hierarchy, the balance. I know what you've said about me, and that doesn't bother me. The worse things people say the better. That's what Father John will never understand. But now I hear other things, things that make me worry about you and about our balance. You know the priests don't stand a chance, not unless they are given some help. I have informants too. I have eyes in every

part of this town. Someone's been coming to see you, one of my men. Regular visits, the kind that mean he's selling you information. I've taken care of that man already, he won't be coming to see you anymore. This wouldn't have bothered me so much in the past, but things are different now. How did you put it? The game is changing; is that what you said? Strange what a man will confess at the point of death, the smallest details, anything to stay alive. But you're right, the game is changing." He tapped his ash into a tin can on the table, took his time rolling the end to an even cherry.

Travis watched Harry; he couldn't look at Frank. He knew nothing of the man Frank spoke about, but guessed the message was for him as much as it was for Harry. If Frank had a man watching the cathedral, then he knew about Father John. The only question was how much he knew.

"I never liked you Harry. I always thought you were a weasel, too afraid to take a side, or too proud. When things get complicated, you're the type who turns first. I don't like that you know about the hard drive. It's only a matter of time before you sell out to the priests. And I don't need you anymore because I've got Simon. He's mine now, whether he knows it or not. So this is the end of our partnership. If you're honest with yourself, you will see that this was a long time coming."

Harry was quiet and still, his lack of emotion so profound that Travis thought he was going to pull a gun from under the table and start shooting. But instead he just sat there looking arrogant. Even now he acted like he was better than them, and this made Travis hate him. He waited for Harry to speak, but Harry just stared back at Frank like he didn't have a care in the world. The longer Harry was silent, the angrier Travis got. He felt the rage swelling up in his

chest and throat, could taste it like a bad meal. He wanted Harry to talk. Sometimes a man needs an excuse to bash a head in.

Travis stood up, kicked his chair across the room and leaned across the table, knuckles digging into the hard oak. "Say something!" he yelled.

"Easy Travis," Frank said. He put his hand on Travis's shoulder. "Let him get his thoughts together. You've always had something to say, Harry. Say it now."

Harry stared at the cigarette in Frank's hand.

"Would you like one?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

Frank pulled one from his pocket and Harry lit it. He inhaled, rolled the smoke around in his mouth, then blew it out slowly. "I've never tasted anything so goddamn good. Even in the old days I never had a smoke so good. It's something, what you've done here. If someone had told me fifteen years ago what it would be like now, I wouldn't have believed them. You gave us hope, Frank. You could have been a king, but you fucked it up. You had it mostly right, but you forgot the most important thing, what separates you and your kind from the rest of us." He flicked an ash on the floor. "Would you like to know what it is?"

Frank smiled. "Please, tell me."

"You forgot that people aren't like you, or maybe you never knew it in the first place. You're a mistake, Frank, an evolutionary blunder. If we were all like you, we'd have killed each other off long ago. You believed we'd see you as a strong leader, and we did, for awhile. We went along with you against our better judgements because you told us you had a plan. But how do you judge right and wrong in a place that's gone crazy? Its impossible. Your true self slips away and you become something else. You become you, Frank, but worse, a follower, an engine

part. I made a deal with you and I've regretted it ever since. But it was only a matter of time before the people saw you for what you really are."

"And what's that?" Frank asked, the smile gone from his lips.

"A cockroach in a pile of garbage. Nothing lasts forever. Your time here is done." He took a final drag, then ground his cigarette into the middle of the oak table until it was a black smudge. He walked slowly to the middle of the room, turned his back, and looked up at the ceiling.

Frank focused on the chair Harry had been sitting in as his eyes narrowed. He didn't look at Travis; he didn't have to.

Travis fired twice into Harry's back, and Harry stumbled into the wood stove, knocking the coffee to the floor. Harry turned to face them, his expression unwavering, holding his breath. Travis fired again and Harry fell. He rolled onto his back, gasping for air. The fluid clicked and popped in his throat and lungs with each panicked breath. His eyes traced up the wall and across the ceiling to the little window in the corner. As his breathing slowed he stared at the little window, until his chest heaved for the last time, and his eyes saw nothing.

Travis reloaded his gun, looking at the mess, the blood and the coffee pooling around Harry, thinking how much he would've loved a cup of coffee to go with a cigarette.

### 39. The Day after Tomorrow

The green military duffle bag was made of coarse canvas, had an impeccable silver zipper, and was stamped “Reinhardt” in black stencil. It was weathered and tough-looking, doubtless a survivor of many an ordeal even before Simon had salvaged it from a flooded army surplus store in the city’s west end.

He emptied the bag’s contents onto Eva’s living room floor, handling each item methodically. There were small plastic bags of seeds and a larger one of fertilizer that Eva had stolen from the North Town greenhouse. There was a compass and roadmap of the land north of the city, hiker’s tent and sleeping bag, matches and fishing tackle. There was a hunting knife with a sharpening stone fixed to its leather case, flint, a Tupperware packed with cartridges for the forty-five, a spool of thread, sewing needle, duct tape, and a length of rolled copper wire. There was a dog-eared survival book (also salvaged from the army surplus store) that showed how to make traps and snares and told which wild plants were edible and which were not. And there were cans of food from before the fall that Simon had saved for just this occasion, wrapped in a faded blue towel to protect from dents and scratches, the labels worn off every one of them.

These cans were the key to their escape through the outskirts, sustenance that required no heating, no fires that would draw attention. He stacked them in neat, symmetrical rows, knowing from their shape what was in them, hoping their ancient seals would hold for just another few months.

But the seeds were the real prize, and Simon marvelled at them.

“How long will they keep?” he asked.

“Five, maybe six years if they’re kept dry.” Eva said, wide-eyed and excited. Simon pictured her in the cabin’s backyard garden surrounded by the tall slat-wood fence and lush foliage he remembered from his childhood.

“These seeds are our future,” he said, holding the baggies in his hands like he was holding handfuls of earth. “Tools we can scavenge, meat we can kill, but a garden is the key to true independence. If it fails, we fail.”

“We won’t fail,” she said. “What will we do until spring?”

“We’ll set traps and forage. You’d be surprised what is edible in the bush, even in winter. You just have to know what you’re looking for. And after last frost, we’ll plant. Our timing must be perfect.”

“It will be.”

He pulled back the heavy curtain and looked at the clear night sky, the bright moon and myriad of stars. The events of earlier that night were still with him.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, standing near the fireplace, one hand on the white mantle and the other on her hip. Her bag was near the door, packed and ready to go.

“Nothing,” he said. The courtyard of half-melted snow and ice shone brilliantly, its pock-marks and imperfections lit up like rough-cut silver encased in a delicate frame of wrought iron.

“The day after tomorrow, I’ll be here in the morning. If I’m late, wait for me, I’ll come.”

“And if you don’t?”

“There’s a chance things could go wrong.”

“So why go?”

A cold breeze touched him on the cheek. It was warm near the fire, but she must have had a draft somewhere. He looked at the door and saw the gap underneath, a good half-inch.



“I said why go?”

“I have to go.”

She tapped the mantle with her fingertips, curling her toes the way she did when she was anxious. “I thought we had a plan.”

“We do.”

“Then what changed?”

“Everything changed, but not for you and me.”

“Where is he?”

“Frank’s safe house.” Simon thought about the two dead men in the apartment, and Anton’s indifference at staying there alone. I’ve slept in worse places, Anton had said, and Simon understood because he had too.

“You couldn’t bring him here.”

She was right; he didn’t want Anton anywhere near her. The way he’d killed Dan like it was nothing, the look in his eyes—pure rage. Anton Vargas would continue until he accomplished what he’d set out to do, or until he was dead. But despite his brutality, Simon didn’t think him capable of hurting an innocent person. If he’d thought that, he wouldn’t have agreed to help him. Anton was a crusader, and men like that are never understood in their time. And in his heart, Simon believed that Anton wasn’t so different from himself—sometimes all it takes is one moment to change everything, and now he had to make Eva understand.

“If you can’t bring him here, then maybe you shouldn’t be helping him.”

He wanted to tell her that everything from his other life didn’t belong here, that she was too important to tarnish with his violence, but instead he just looked at her and she seemed to understand, sense how important it was.

“I have to go because I have to set things right. How many times have we talked about what’s wrong with this place? And now I have a chance to do something about it. If I just turn my back on him, Frank will kill him. He needs me.”

“But if we leave, none of that matters.”

“It matters more than ever. So we get out, make a run for the cabin and save ourselves, and then what? What about everyone else, the people at the cathedral? I’ve worked for Frank, I’ve been the reason people died. I can’t undo that, but I can help Anton stop him.”

She curled her toes, and Simon noticed the red nail polish she must have been saving for a special occasion. “He’ll kill him?”

“Yes.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Get him inside Frank’s building.”

“It was Anton that killed that guy in the market, wasn’t it? A man nobody has seen before, too smart to be loner. I never realized it was him until just now. Aren’t you afraid he’ll turn on you too?”

“He’s not like them.”

“And neither are you. But you’re not a killer, he is. Anton Vargas killed a man over nothing. What kind of man is that?”

Not over nothing, Simon thought. Anton was a killer, but he was driven, had a purpose. He had it in his mind to kill Frank and was scared of nothing. And when Simon looked him in the eyes, only certainty stared back, like he knew truths beyond what words can describe, as though Simon had been in a dark room and Anton had turned a light on, forced him to look at

truths he knew were there all along, and look inside himself and decide what kind of man he wanted to be. Anton Vargas was more than Simon had ever been, and he admired him.

“He’s the kind of man I’d want on my side,” Simon said.

She sighed. “If you have to do this, then I can’t stop you. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to leave this place. But you’ve made up your mind, and I understand. But what happens when Baxter’s dead? What happens to South Town when he’s gone?”

Simon didn’t answer. The idea of South Town without Frank was as ominous as it was with him in it. But it could be Frank had concocted this idea of a world where only a man like he was fit to lead. Simon had heard about Marciello Vargas, who was nothing like Frank, and the town had flourished. Maybe Frank was necessary only to protect the people from men like himself, perpetuating the endless cycle of violence. If there was any hope, Simon thought, it was outside the two towns, as far away as possible.

He closed the curtain, extinguishing the night.

She took the white photo album from her bag. “Come here, I want to show you something.”

She opened it to a picture of a beautiful young woman with dark hair and green eyes, standing on the porch of a red brick bungalow. The woman was slender, with the same self-possessed look in her eyes that Eva had.

“My mother,” Eva said. “I made this album when I was a little girl. I was always fascinated with family pictures, and I’d steal all the best ones from my mother’s albums to make my own. She never got mad at me for that; I think she appreciated how much I loved the idea of family. I wanted so much for us to be a happy family, but we weren’t. There was so much anger between my parents, irresolvable anger. My dad would drink, my mother would fret, bury her

resentments inside until she could no longer take it. They were two people who had wanted to love each other, but found out when it was too late that they were just too different. But to my dad, it was unthinkable to abandon his family, so he drank instead, and killed my mother slowly. At the end, there was no more light in his eyes, hers either. I used to look at myself in the mirror, aware that I was the reason for their unhappiness. I used to think that there was something I could do to make them love each other.

“When the water came, my father wasn’t home, out drinking somewhere I guess. There was no time to think, suddenly it was there. My mother and I clung to each other as it flooded our home, until finally we were torn apart. The last image I have of her is the terror and desperation on her face as I was sucked away in the torrent. She swam, tried to reach me, but the water was too strong and pulled us apart forever. I was sucked down the street that had become a river, objects that could crush me everywhere. Eventually I grabbed onto a tree, scrambled up its thick branches, and as I searched for my mother, I saw the photo album bobbing among the wreckage. I reached down and pulled it from the water. I sat in that tree until the thirst made me leave, and I’ve been surviving ever since.”

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them she turned to Simon. Her hair was at her shoulders, her neck bare and pale.

“You know it’s not your fault, any of it.”

“I know, but it doesn’t make it easier.” She closed the photo album and leaned into him.

“She was beautiful,” Simon said. “You look just like her, you know. The eyes mostly, but more than that. I can see the determination on her face like I can see it on yours now.”

“This is how I like to remember her, this picture here, not the way she looked when we were separated. I always thought that before she died in the water, she died of a broken heart,

and the seconds or minutes between must've been awful. I was her daughter, she loved me more than anything, and she couldn't protect me. I always think about the anguish she must have felt in that moment of separation. When I think about the worst days I've had, the worst fear I've felt, nothing comes close to that."

She went to the bedroom and returned with a black backpack. She slipped it on and Simon tightened the straps. "Clothes. Just like you said."

"Just make sure you've got what you need to keep warm out there."

"What about you?"

"I'll wear mine, squeeze a few extra pieces into the duffle bag, strip layers off during the day. We need to travel light, and we need all the other gear. I can find more clothes when we get close to the cabin." He lifted the bag off her shoulders and inspected the buckles, the seams.

"How does the weight feel? Can you run with it on?"

"I think so."

They emptied the pack on the living room floor, all clothing except the white photo album that she had wrapped in a wool scarf. "It needs to come," she said, ready to defend her decision. But Simon understood.

They went through her items one by one, the same ritual Simon had performed many times with his green duffle bag in his own apartment. They started with the most essential items and worked backwards. And when they were finished they did it again.

## 40. The Hunt

Three sets of moose tracks skirted the edge of the ice-covered pond through the few inches of snow that had fallen fresh that morning. Simon paused to test the wind direction, feeling the freezing air in his lungs, thinking the north was the coldest place in the world.

The tracks curved around a block of tag alders that jutted out from the tree line into the knee-high grass surrounding the pond. The tops of the alders had been chewed away by the moose, and the taupe tree-flesh stood out on the tips of the black branches.

He followed the tracks with the wind at his nose and rifle cradled in his arms, walking two steps and observing five, the way his father had taught him. He rounded the tag alders, and through the blowing snow could just make out the heavy spruce at the far end of the pond. He scanned the tree line carefully, seeing nothing at first, and then slowly a black mound began to materialize. It looked like a blow-down, standing out because it was the only thing not covered in snow.

He took the lens caps off his scope, brought the rifle to his shoulder, and sure enough, he made out the forequarters and head of an adult moose, then a small rack camouflaged in the brush, a yearling bull.

Simon knelt in the grass and watched the bull graze along the shoreline, oblivious to Simon at the far end of the pond, about a hundred yards away. It was a shot Simon was confident he could make, but with the snow and ideal wind direction he decided his best chance at a good kill was to creep as close as possible. He studied the landscape around the pond, saw a clump of grass and tag alders about two-thirds of the way to the moose, and decided he would shoot from there.

He removed his pack and orange hunting cap and vest, laying them on a thicket of grass, and staying low and hunched, followed the tracks around the pond. He didn't run, but he didn't walk slowly either. A bit of a quick-step, relying on the wind direction and the animal's poor eyesight. He moved in rhythm with the moose's feeding. When it lowered its head to eat, Simon scurried. When it perked up to listen and look, Simon waited. He continued in this fashion until he reached the spot he'd targeted.

Thirty yards away from the moose, behind the clump of grass and alders, he knelt on one knee, rested the elbow of his left arm holding the front stock on the other, and looked through the scope, had to reduce the zoom to take in the whole area. Simon made out the bull's head and bell, clear as day, but now he could see another animal moving just inside the tree line. This one was much bigger, possibly a large bull, but it was too far back in the bush and Simon couldn't see it clearly. But there were three sets of tracks, which because it was the tail-end of the rut, made it very likely to be a cow and two bulls. As was often the case with moose, the less cautious younger animal was the one out in the open.

Simon flicked the safety off. He had a choice now. He could take the smaller moose and be done with it, or he could wait until the larger one showed itself. Between Simon and his father, they only had one tag, a bull tag. Technically, Simon's father was the one with the tag, and technically, he should be within radio contact of Simon for Simon to legally shoot the moose, but they never worried too much about stuff like that. They were so far back in the bush and off the beaten path, that only the most determined conservation officer would ever drive, quad, and then walk the many miles of crown land to the remote pond that Simon was on now. Simon and his father had blazed the trails themselves, it was doubtful anyone else even knew they existed. Besides, they had another way to contact each other if one of them shot the coveted

bull—after all the shooting was done, and the moose was dead, the shooter would fire three shots in rapid succession, thus letting the other know a bull was down. Once the shots were heard, the other would make his way to the shooter, and then the real work of gutting, quartering, and carrying would begin.

Simon wanted to shoot. It took all of his willpower not to shoot. He'd never bagged a moose before, and here was one right in his cross-hairs. His heart pounded. He heard nothing beyond the rushing pulse inside his head. The snow lingered in the air as though time had slowed, the only thing moving in real-time the small bull, and just beyond it, the larger animal.

Simon waited.

Then the small bull lifted his head quickly; something had startled him. He looked directly at Simon as though Simon had made some kind of commotion, but he hadn't made a sound. Simon cursed under his breath. A wind shift, maybe.

The bull lifted its snout to scent the air, head slowly bobbing up and down, eye still on Simon and the suspect clump of grass and alders. The large animal behind him had stopped moving as well, taking its cue from the sacrificial lamb out in the open.

Simon could take the moose now. One shot to the boiler room, not a single twig or blade of grass between the muzzle of his .308 and the bull's heart and lungs, but he waited. After about one minute the moose resumed grazing, danger abated. And then the other one showed himself.

Simon saw his rack first, emerging from the brush, two giant palms and at least a dozen tines, had to be a fifty-inch span. His head swayed like a wrecking ball, the big bull asserting himself, warning the little guy to move along.

Two lumbering steps and there he was in all his glory, broadside to Simon, massive head turned, surveying the pond like a King. Twelve-hundred pounds, easy.



Simon's heart was beating insanely, hands trembling. He took deep breaths, all he could do to calm himself. He put the crosshairs just behind the bull's front quarter, imagining the animal's enormous heart behind all that bone, flesh, and hair, inhaled long and deep, and when all the air was expelled from his lungs, squeezed the trigger.

Boom.

The first thing he saw was the small bull take off like a shot—gone. Then he saw the monster slump forward, front legs giving out so that he was kneeling. He threw his massive head back, trying to lift himself, gain some traction under his wobbly legs, and Simon fired again. The bull dropped again, panicking, laboured snorts echoing across the pond as he tried to get some air into his lungs, exhaling big white clouds.

Simon reloaded, fired again, and the bull finally stopped moving. His head rested on one of his antlers as he let out two more bellowing gasps, and then died.

Simon waited a few minutes before approaching the moose, the air still and quiet after all the shooting. The first thing that struck him was the amount of blood. It was everywhere, sprayed on the snow and grass like a man had come through with a paint brush and can of red paint, covering the branches and pooled around the moose, seeping into the snow. It was pungent, sweetly metallic, pervasive.

Simon cautiously approached the downed bull, gun at the hip and five more rounds in the clip because this was a twelve-hundred pound animal and because you never know. The eye turned to Simon was glassy, looking nowhere in particular, and Simon touched it with the muzzle of his gun, a sure-fire way to test if the animal was dead. Simon's father had told him a story once of a bull he'd shot, that he'd thought was dead but had come to life with a final,

tremendous swing of his colossal front hoof, that had it connected with Simon's father's head would've taken it clear off. He waited for me, his father had said, wanted to kill me.

Because you never know.

Simon flicked the safety on, and leaned the rifle in the fork of an alder branch. He knelt beside the bull and put his hand on its side, feeling the warmth still emanating from the great body. He saw where the three bullets had entered—all good shots, not an ounce of wasted meat. This was important to Simon.

He felt a twinge of sadness at the life he'd just taken, how ten minutes ago the moose was alive and now it wasn't. But he understood why he did it, knew there was honour in the killing. This was his family's meat, harvested from the bush. They would live off this moose for the next year, enough roasts, steaks and pepperettes to last until the following season. Nothing wrong with a good, clean bush kill.

Simon lifted the rifle to his shoulder, aimed at a dead-fall just inside the tree line, and fired three quick shots. Then he walked back to the spot where he'd left his packsack and his orange, and when he returned he sat on a log, poured a cup of lemon tea, and waited for his father who had the ropes, come-along, and bone saw. He looked at his watch, happy that it was still early; they would have all day to quarter the animal and hump it out of the bush.

This was Simon's first moose. He was fourteen.

## 41. The Outskirts

It was dawn and the sun was cresting the city on the river's eastern shore. The skyscrapers were like scraggly winter trees, lifeless, obstructing the yellow sun that flickered between the buildings like firelight and would burst over their tops at any moment.

When Anton was a boy, he'd thought that if he looked hard enough at the city on the other side of the river, he would see people there. He believed that over there things were better than in his own community. He believed that technology still functioned, and he dreamed of its magnificence, envisioning lights, music and children playing. Life, he assumed, was more exciting across the river, and he could never understand why his brother wanted to stay in South Town. But as with most questions Anton asked, Marciello had a good answer. He told him it wasn't wise to return to the place they'd fled, because across the river the worst of humankind existed, nothing but murderers and bad men. The city was no longer good, he had said, not the way you remember it. But we came from there, Anton had said, so what are we? We are good, Marciello answered, and if anyone from the city comes to us, we will help them, but we don't go looking for trouble.

Anton believed his brother, but never completely understood. To Anton, the city still represented all that it did before the fall, and it was difficult to comprehend that things there were profoundly different now. The fall had changed life and culture everywhere, but Anton only saw his brother's community, and in its simplicity, his brother's deficiencies.

But more than the city he dreamed about the beach. He remembered the bright sun, the blue-in-blue ocean and the endless strip of perfect sand. He remembered playing football with Marciello and bodysurfing the waves. He thought that if there was one place not affected by the terribleness of the fall, it was there, and more than anything else he wanted to go there. Many

times Anton wanted to ask his brother about the south and the beach they had travelled to every winter, but he never did. He knew that Marciello would give the same answer he gave about the city, and Anton preferred to remember it his own way.

“When you left me at the safe house, where did you go?” Anton asked.

Simon was walking a few paces ahead, and pretended not to hear Anton’s question.

“Is it a woman?” Anton asked.

“We need to keep moving,” Simon answered, and Anton knew that it was.

“Why do we need to keep moving?”

“Because the last time I came through here I nearly got my throat cut.”

“A loner?”

“Two. Distract and kill,” Simon said over his shoulder.

“The River Road doesn’t agree with you, then.”

Simon shrugged. “It doesn’t agree with anyone.”

The ground was frozen and a layer of frost covered the hardened mud that crunched under their feet. These were the days of freezing nights and hot afternoons, the desert landscape cruelty that Anton remembered vividly from his time in the city. The elements, however, never bothered Anton. He liked the harsh cold air on his skin, the burn in his nostrils. He had learned to thrive in places other people rejected and feared, even sought them out.

“What are you afraid of?” Anton asked.

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“No, I see it. You’re more afraid here than in North Town where you’re surrounded by enemies.”

“I’m not afraid, I’m cautious. In North Town I have control, I know what to say to a person. But there’s nothing to say to a loner, nothing to bargain with, so I try not to be seen. If they don’t know I’m here, they can’t kill me.”

“But your fear makes you a target,” Anton said.

The morning sun peaked above the buildings across the river and he put his hand up to block its glare as he scanned the trail’s edge ahead. He looked for signs of movement, listened for anomalies in the quiet dawn.

“There’s a difference between caution and fear,” Simon said. “It’s too easy to get comfortable here. You think there’s nobody for miles, that the road is deserted, and then a rock crushes your skull.”

Anton said nothing. He squinted, enjoying the sun’s warmth against his cheek. Nothing warms a body like the sun. It reminded him that winter was approaching fast.

He looked again at the trail’s edge and then, facing the trees, let out a loud wolf-like howl.

Simon jumped. “What the hell are you doing, you’ll give us away!”

Anton stopped. He turned his back on the trees and faced Simon. “That’s what I’m telling you, they already know we’re here.”

Simon looked passed Anton into the tree line, fear written all over him, no hiding it. It was in his heaving chest, his wide eyes that glared at Anton. “I didn’t agree to help you so I could get myself killed.”

“I had to prove a point.”

“What point?”

“That you can’t hide here. Away from the towns maybe, but on River Road there are people from one end to the other, and they are as afraid of you as you are of them. Just like you know everything about South Town, they know these outskirts and who is in them. They’re not the animals you think they are. They are like men and women everywhere else and only want to survive. They’re smart, they wait for the ones they know they can take, distract one and kill the other. They already know we’re here. You’ve missed the signs: frost wiped from the grass, a snap where there should be none.”

“There were no tracks.”

“They don’t leave tracks where you’d see them. We passed two loners awhile back hiding inside the tree line, hunting us. I saw them and they knew I saw them. But they won’t attack because they know they can’t win. It doesn’t matter how loud you are, because they already know we’re here.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I’ve lived here. I’ve lived in many places, even in the city after everyone good was dead or gone. There are other places where people go on living, good places and bad places. You think Baxter is protecting you, but he’s only keeping the truth from you. There are other places. Knock down the walls and the people who get in will be the same as the people who live there now, men like Frank and men who beg. He keeps you afraid so he can control you. If everyone believes what he says about outskirts, nobody will challenge him or try to leave.”

“It’s more than that,” Simon said. “Frank is afraid that someone like him will come along, someone like him but worse. Thing is, they’ve gotten in already. They’ve been here all along.”

“What do you mean?”

“The priests. That’s what they call themselves, but when I remember a priest I don’t think of these men. These aren’t men of god. They give the people hope with their handouts and their speeches, but it’s all lies. I can’t blame the people for being fooled because anything is better than to live in constant fear. Fear of the outskirts, fear of Baxter, fear of protecting the people you love.”

Anton frowned. He didn’t feel pity for the people of South Town. Nobody had felt it for him when he needed it most, so he would return the favour.

“Have you been north?” Simon asked.

“How far?”

“Farther than North Town, past the river valley and the big highway.”

“A long time ago, why?”

“Once we’re done, that’s where I’m going.”

“With the woman?”

Simon didn’t respond.

“There are less people that way. Most are south, where it’s warmer and easier to grow food. Over the wall and along the river will be the worst place. Dangerous there. If you’re taking a woman, it will be difficult to protect her near the wall. A man alone has nothing to lose; a man with a woman has everything to lose. I wouldn’t take her.”

“I have to take her.”

“Then you must protect her. They will come for you. How far are you going?”

“Five hundred kilometres.”

“Seven days, maybe eight. I’ve never been that far north, I don’t know what’s up there. Could be anything, other towns, settlements. Stay on small roads, the kind with small signs and

two lanes. Farther north, there will be fewer roads, and that will bring another problem: where roads converge there are people, avoid these areas. That's the only advice I can give you. Why are you going?"

"For the same reason you've returned, because I haven't given up on something better. It's a shame, this place. Two men died yesterday for nothing. I hope its better in other places, but I can't help but think that wherever there are men, things will be the same. If we had the code to the hard drive, at least we could see what's out there."

The sun was full on Anton's cheek, illuminating his thick beard. In an hour, the frost would be melted and the birds would be singing like it was spring and not the cusp of winter.

"Nothing is out there," he said. "There is no Eden, no place where things remain. You don't need a satellite to tell you that because you feel it in your gut. There is no hope for the past. We will never again rely on the things that our parents had and their parents. We are all animals now and we do things for two reasons only: necessity or fear. Hope is dead."

Simon looked down at the road then across the still, blue river to the city on the other side. "When hope is dead, the man is dead," he said, walking ahead, and Anton realized that this was a man with his own mission, his own beliefs and thoughts beyond Baxter's South Town. Anton admired Simon's sense of purpose, even if he didn't believe in his hope.

For Anton, the future was as bleak as it had ever been. When Frank was dead he would go south, but the prospect was becoming more and more daunting the closer he got to his goal. What will my purpose be then, Anton thought, what will give me hope? He focused on the trail, forcing the thought from his mind. He never allowed these types of thoughts much leeway. He had found the one thing that kept him alive over the years, was a steady stream of visualizations. Since he was a boy, alone in the city, he would visualize his next move, play it out like a script.



He thought about the possible outcomes of every decision he made before attempting anything significant, that way he knew how to react in all situations without having to think. From the moment he'd made the plan with Simon, Anton visualized coming face to face with Baxter. Anton would play the courier from North Town, and he thought about how a man like that would act; he thought about James. Most importantly, he thought about the possible scenarios and outcomes the meeting might bring. Preparation, Marciello would say, is the key to success.

But there was one scenario Anton couldn't control. No amount of careful planning or forethought could control what happened when Anton lost his cool. When the pressure built in his chest and mounted like a house on fire, and his ears and eyes got hot and blood-filled and sounds blended into one another, all his planning, all his visualizations meant nothing.

The only thing that threatened Anton was Anton himself.

## 42. A Priest's Work

"Frank knows; we can't meet again until it's over." Travis rested his elbows on his knees, and leaned forward on the little bench. The room was so small that he wanted scream. He felt the walls closing in on him, stifling his breathing and his thoughts. But the sacristy was the only place safe enough to meet Father John.

Travis felt no emotion in betraying Frank, it was only business. He'd felt disposable for some time and assumed it was only a matter of time before Frank came after him with accusations and bullets. It was better this way. And since confiding in Father John he'd felt as though the great burden would finally be lifted from his shoulders. The killing of Marciello Vargas had affected him profoundly, building to a crescendo that he was now powerless against. Travis saw his face every day now. From a distance, all men were him. From this prison, Father John would set him free.

"I heard about Harry," Father John said. "Why didn't you tell me Frank was outside his building, we could have taken care of him then." He handed Travis a glass of cider and took a sip from his own. They were celebrating. He wiped the excess liquid from his mouth, dabbing with a white cloth from beside the water basin.

"No time. I thought he was going to kill me. I never know anymore. Frank killed Harry because he thought he was talking to you. Is this true?"

"No, but Harry was a branch moving in the wind; he would have come to me sooner or later."

Travis looked at Father John. "So what am I?"

"You're a man who wants to be set free from his pain," Father John answered quickly.

"This is much different."

The dark wood walls in the sacristy seemed to suck the light from the candles. Their flames were smaller inside the tiny room, as though the walls were constructed of a tinted liquid, blood or oil, formed into a solid and commanded to hold for centuries. They drew the flames, pulling at right angles, coaxing them to jump from their wicks into the aqueous unknown.

“And what of the hard drive?”

Travis took a sip of his cider; the stuffy air had made it tasteless. “They never showed last night. Frank is concerned.”

“Maybe they’re dead.”

“Or maybe they’re just late. It’s a long way to North Town, things happen. But I don’t trust the kid.”

Father John squeezed the mug, wide fingers wrapped around the earth-toned ceramic. “So what do you have in mind?”

“Frank’s orders are for them to come straight to the building. They’ll have the courier, and we’ll get the code. But what Frank doesn’t know is that they’ll already have the code. Those were my orders to Dan.”

“Frank doesn’t know this?”

Travis shook his head. “No. The kid will go to Harry first with the information, I’m betting on it.” He looked at Father John for a long moment. “And that’s where you come in.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll get it from him.”

“Me?”

“You. I’ve proved myself, now it’s your turn.”

“And the other two?”

“I’ll take care of them. Just get the code, and get rid of the kid.”

“You expect me to kill him?”

“He’s a risk.”

The priest scratched his chin, then downed his cider. He looked hard at Travis, trying to regain some of that upper hand he’d carried through their meetings, but Travis wouldn’t budge.

Finally, the priest reached out with his soft hand, which looked like it had never done a single day’s honest work, and shook Travis’s hand.

Travis smiled, wishing he could be there when Father John did it. He pictured him holding a gun, taking a life, the prospect was so unlikely. But when they shook hands, the priest’s grip was strong, and somehow Travis knew that Father John was up to the task.

## 43. Visualizations

Simon's apartment had been searched, closets and drawers left open, his few belongings rifled through and left haphazardly. In the kitchen, Frank's men had pulled cupboard doors from hinges, and tossed Simon's pathetic cooking utensils to the floor. They were making a statement. The thugs needed to get their point across.

Anton looked at Simon's possessions strewn about, admiring his simplicity. Simon's apartment wasn't an extension of his personality, the way some homes can be. It was oblivious to Simon's true nature, a place to sleep and prepare for the next job, something Anton could relate to. But every man has remnants of his other self hidden away; it's just a case of finding where.

"They are warning you," Anton said.

"Probably. We were supposed to return last night. Frank wants me to know I can't run."

"Why would you come back here if you were going to run?"

"To prepare."

Anton looked around the apartment. He didn't see any gear or supplies anywhere. "Do they know about her?"

Simon glared at Anton. "No."

"Have you told anyone?"

"You're the only one who knows."

Simon walked to the photograph above the couch. He pushed up one corner then stood back and appraised it, eyes lining up its edge with the doorframe a few feet over.

"Where was it taken?"

"India."

Anton looked closely at the image, clearly the one item in the apartment Simon valued. In the field were green stalks taller than a man, with wide palms eighteen inches or more across that hung heavy with humidity. The blue cart was laden with harvested bananas, and Anton noticed the rolled skirts and brown-skinned men and it looked like India. He asked about Simon's interest in the distant subcontinent.

"A few years ago I saw that picture in a house in the outskirts, the only thing that wasn't broken. I lived in India when I was a boy, and the photo was taken close to where I grew up; I recognize the field and the road. I saw it hanging on the wall like it was waiting for me to find it, so I brought it here. It reminds me of my childhood, the good and the bad, everything. Strange, isn't it, how it only takes one moment to change the rest of your life. I guess everyone feels like that, like something was taken from them years ago. But we each had our moments before the fall, the ones that defined us, made us who we are, and that photo reminds me of mine."

Simon moved the couch exposing the floor boards underneath. He pried up some loose boards with his jackknife, and Anton saw cans of food and gear, a cache. There was also plenty of empty space, and Anton figured that Simon had recently taken items out.

"I told you that when this is over I'm heading north. Everything I need is already in North Town, so come here and take what you want. Take it all if you can carry it all. It will buy you some time." He handed Anton a can of food and put one into the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. "I'm going to see Harry now. We need bullets. You got a forty-five, right? It's the only reload he makes, the only gun in South Town. The kids pick up the empty shells and get a half-coin for five of them. But the powder and primers are another story. Harry had them stock piled for years before the fall, has the market cornered now. I guess he was preparing all along for something none of us could see coming."

He looked at the photograph again, fiddling with the tin can in his pocket. "I remember the big ships off the coast. They were far out to sea but on a good day you could make them out on the horizon, like paper boats you could hold in your hand. They cut between the ocean and the sky and stood out against everything else, the greys and the blacks and the blues. Oil tankers mostly, from the Middle East. I always wanted one to come into port, but the big ones never did. I wonder where they are now." He put up his hood and left the apartment.

Anton opened the can with the small blade of his pocket knife. The meat was pungent, laced with chemical preservatives, and he ate it in big chunks off the blade.

He looked at the photograph, studied the two people. They reminded him of Marciello and himself, and he imagined it was them guiding a banana cart down some dusty path in India, only it wasn't India, it was here in South Town. Brothers bringing food to the people who needed it, the way it was supposed to be. A life full of hope, and one moment had changed everything.

In the back of his mind, he heard his brother telling him to think clearly. Frank was the one he wanted, but Travis Parker was the one to watch. While Frank was preoccupied with the code, Travis would be watching his back. He was the real threat.

Anton moved the couch, pried up the loose boards and took another can from the place in the floor, eating the meat to build his strength.

He stood in the middle of the room with his gun in the back of his pants, his wrists behind him like they were tied, and went for the gun with his right hand. He did this over and over, visualizing Frank and the moment they'd be face to face. He pictured the office as he remembered it from his hideout across the street, and thought about the placement of furniture and where Travis usually stood during a meeting. He thought about the moment he'd grab his gun, and what might happen if Simon couldn't play his part well enough. The hardest part of the

whole plan was trusting Simon. Anton had never trusted another person since the day his brother died, and he hoped he wasn't making a big mistake now.

He used to get butterflies when he thought about the moment, but now there were only the pictures in his mind. Many years had passed since Marciello's murder, and Anton wondered if Frank would recognize him. He hoped that Frank didn't die too quickly so he could make him remember.



## 44. The Other Self

The path to the side entrance of the cathedral was melted away. Only the big drift was still there, covered in flecks of black dirt and receding like a glacier, exposing the mud and rocks underneath. Simon rang the bell on the side door, but there was no answer. He rang it again, and a few moments later the latch turned with a loud click. The people at the cathedral steps turned away when they saw him standing there.

He pushed the door open expecting to be greeted by Harry in one of his Hawaiian shirts, but the entrance was dark and empty. He followed the glow coming from the main room, daylight streaming in through the high windows at a shallow angle and reflecting off the opposite wall. He approached the big table in the middle of the room, and there he saw Harry lying beside the wood stove; blood had pooled around his body like spilled paint. His eyes were still open, opaque with death, looking up and away at the point where the light hit the wall. His hands were clenched into fists at his chest, and his gold chain was high on his neck, a delicate yellow noose. He had the same look Simon remembered from the other day in the market: acceptance. Harry had made his play by not making one. The young and hungry can always sense it when the old can't hack it anymore; it's instinctual.

Simon sat down at the table, eyes fixed on Harry and the blood. He felt like throwing up. Harry was the only friend Simon ever had in South Town. He'd made Simon believe that good people still existed, and with his death went the last glimmer of hope Simon had in South Town. Nothing could keep him here any longer. He looked at Harry's hands clenched like an old woman's, the defeat in his eyes. He wanted to scream. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, fighting the emotion that was brimming to the surface, that would make him irrational if he

didn't control it. He made his hands into fists, wanting to drive them through the table, but instead he buried his head in his hands.

In the middle of the table, he saw a black smudge. He rubbed his finger in it, smelling Frank's tobacco. Underneath the table he saw a half-smoked cigarette. He picked it up and lit it, inhaling deeply as he looked at Harry's lifeless body, wishing that Frank could have left him alone for just one more day.

"Simon Gray," a voice said from the darkness.

Simon looked towards the entrance.

"I heard the shot from the other side of the wall," the voice said. "We all did. So I took it upon myself to be the bearer of bad news. I'm sorry about your friend. This is a tragedy, Harry was an honest man. It's a shame how the good ones never make it in this world. Men like Baxter make the rules, but they never stop to ask us if we want to play by them."

Simon recognized Father John. He was wearing a brown robe and no shoes, his vigorous beard neatly trimmed. His eyes were bright, yet compassionate, the embodiment of piety and kindness. Even now, heavy with Harry's death, Simon's looked for cracks in Father John's presentation; it was automatic.

Simon heard the organ from the other side of the wall start up like an engine, and thought about Father John's sermons from the cathedral steps, and he knew the priest could not be trusted.

"An organ," the priest said, "is a very difficult instrument to play. The one in this cathedral is nearly a hundred years old. We're lucky to have a man who can play it and service it. He's teaching two others so the organ doesn't die with him. It's important that skills like his don't become lost with time. They must be embraced and taught, only then will we be able to

rebuild and become something like we once were, only then. Frank understands this to a degree, but not fully. He's preoccupied with the wrong type of person, the wrong skills."

Simon dropped the cigarette, and ground it under his heel. He turned to the priest. "I didn't come here for a sermon. Harry is dead, you'll get your side of the cathedral back. There's nothing more to talk about."

"Of course. I'm sorry, I'll leave now. I'll say a special prayer for Harry. I can arrange a service if you like."

"No service."

The priest nodded, "I understand." He stood and made like he was leaving, but took his time, playing the patient old monk. Simon could sense his eyes watching him, searching for a way to draw him in further. He took a few steps, hovering by the threshold, and then played his card.

"Harry loved you like a son. He talked about you all the time."

Simon fought the urge to grab the priest by the throat and squeeze until he admitted he was a liar, because Simon needed to play along to see his game. "He never mentioned you."

"I'm not surprised, our discussions were secret. If Frank knew he was talking to me . . . you can imagine."

"Is that why he's dead?"

"Maybe. We thought we had more time to work it out. I'm sorry."

"Work what out?"

Father John looked at the floor, as though he was ashamed to meet Simon's eyes. "Harry was with us."

"With you?"

“Yes.”

“You mean against Frank?”

Father John nodded. “He was going to tell you.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I pray that you do, but it really doesn’t matter now. Harry is gone and nothing will bring him back. All you have is my word, the word of a humble man of God. The truth is that we were talking for some time. We met in the sacristy, just the two of us. Sometimes we met here on his side. When they built that wall, they never made a doorway to the church. It’s nothing but solid brick, so I went through the side entrance like everyone else. I’m surprised you never saw me.”

“What did you talk about?”

“We spoke about many things: life, the future of this town. You knew him well, this I know. I think you knew him better than anybody, and I think I was just beginning to know that person, the Harry that wanted more than this division in a church.”

“Is that what you think?” Simon stared at the priest, ruddy complexion behind the beard, ample stomach. The man was too well-fed—it was disgraceful.

“I’ve seen what you take from the people, and what you give yourselves. Harry and I talked too. About you, and the lies you built your church on. You don’t fool the people. But what’s that phrase from the old days, something about the lesser of evils? Why would Harry join you if he saw right through you, the way I do now?”

Father John smiled. He looked sincere for the first time since they’d started talking.

“Maybe he saw the way things were going, the inevitability. Harry worked for Frank, like you, but wasn’t he a good man? Aren’t you? I’ve lied, I’ve killed, if I didn’t I would be dead, and I’m sure that goes for you too. But I’m better than Frank Baxter. He has no conscience, no morals.

Call it the lesser of evils if that's what you want to call it, but I can promise you better than Frank. We'll clean up this place. We'll get rid of his thugs, his evil."

"Will you rehabilitate his men with your organ and sermons? They're killers, they can't be reasoned with. What will you do with them?"

"Whatever it takes."

"I see."

Simon walked to Harry's bed in the corner of the room. He took a heavy army blanket from a chair and covered Harry's body. "Promise me one thing."

"Yes?"

"Bury him properly, no matter what happens."

"Of course."

"I'll hold you to it. Now what do you want from me?"

"We were waiting for you Simon. I know what you have. I know about the code, the satellites, everything."

"And the hard drive?"

"Don't worry about the hard drive, I have it under control. You play your part and I'll get the hard drive."

Father John leaned back and looked at the tall windows, squinting into the sun's reflection like it was something to be reckoned with, a message from God. And as Simon watched him, he realized his whole demeanour was nothing more than an act. Father John hadn't turned Harry, because Harry would never turn for anyone, least of all the priest. Father John had a man inside Frank's operation; that was the only way he could know about the hard drive. And since he'd entered the room Father John hadn't once looked at Harry, hadn't acknowledged his

presence beyond careful words, as though Harry wasn't lying there at all. A man of God, a friend of Harry's, would have made overtures. He would have said a prayer, been solemn, something beyond just calm, charismatic words. But Father John had looked only at Simon, reading him, studying him, just as Simon did now. And it became clear in an instant that Father John was a grifter, a thief like Simon, and not a true priest. His convoluted facade was a business transaction; it was his other self.

Simon remembered his mother talking about the dual self, the Gemini. She'd said it was a state of being that possessed most people, that it's not in man's nature to be this way, but it's forced upon him through a lifetime of momentary diversions that end up lasting longer than the mere moments they were planned to be, a product of a false environment forcing a person to be something other than what they are. The path one desires and the path one most often finds himself walking become the halves that make up the person, both existing at once but neither fully, so much so that he doesn't know which half he truly is, which half to follow. He becomes a vessel for the immediate, satisfying his most recent urges rather than building towards a singular goal. To be one thing fully, his mother used to tell him, one thing fully and without compromise, that was freedom. That was the way to happiness.

"Who's your man inside?" Simon asked.

"There isn't one. It was Harry."

"I don't believe you."

"We don't need a man inside, we have the people."

"Bullshit. How will you get the hard drive?"

"That's not your concern. You just need to give me the code."

“It would have to be somebody high up, somebody that can get the support of Frank’s men.”

It was somebody who knew about the courier, and Simon’s movements. Simon thought about Frank’s men and who was capable of turning, and slowly the obvious truth began to surface. The only person with enough pull and enough knowledge was Travis Parker. Simon looked at Father John, wondering how he’d managed to turn Travis, a man who seemed hardwired to Frank, obeying him for years. He was a better con-man than Simon could have ever imagined.

“There’s no more code,” Simon said.

The priest’s face sunk into confusion and anger. His mouth quivered as he searched for words. “What do you mean, there’s no more code?”

“The courier’s dead.”

“You must have retrieved it before you killed him, you must have!” He banged his fist on the table, the sound echoing to the high ceiling.

“We got nothing.”

Father John shook with rage. “And what about Dan?”

“Dead,” Simon said. He enjoyed watching emotion overcome Father John.

“You killed him?”

“No.”

“Then who?”

“It’s not your concern.”

Simon knelt by Harry, put his hand on his head and said a final goodbye. He walked to Harry’s desk in the corner of the room, opened the top drawer and took the box of forty-five

caliber cartridges that Harry kept there, but left the cache he knew was hidden under the oak table.

He pulled his gun and loaded the clip.

Father John's eyes were wide and intense. "You're going after him now, aren't you? You and the one who killed Dan."

"Yes."

"And after that?"

Simon turned and popped in the loaded clip. "If you're smart you'll sit this out, see how it plays out. It's the smart play, Father. It's what I would do." He turned and left the cathedral and he knew he would never return.

The sun was setting in a weak, yellow stain. It was a winter sunset, cold and faded into blue sky and somehow it reminded Simon of the arctic he'd never been to. He thought of its vast nothingness, its meld of colours. Yellow into blue, into green and so on. A place devoid of people, where nature and land were king, a place to be one thing fully.

He walked down the pathway beside the cathedral, pausing at the cathedral steps to empty all the coins and the tin of meat from his pockets. He watched the people scramble for the money and food before continuing to his apartment.



## 45. An Honourable Man

The air turned cold with the onset of evening. Travis felt the pressure change inside his skull and knew that bad weather was coming. He welcomed it. Whatever happened, it was best carried out in fresh snow, having undertones of rebirth and so forth. Not that Travis ever thought too much about that sort of thing. Snow reminded him of Christmas, and of the time before Frank.

But there was something of winter in Frank's disposition. He was a cold weather sort, a man who thrived in sub-zero conditions. Back in the city after the fall, they had survived a cold winter huddled in the rusted skeleton of a flipped over five tonne with a beige tarp draped over the cab. The only part of the city that wasn't under water, a hill in the good neighbourhood. They lived for months like hibernating rodents, scrounging what they could, burying their piss. In the cold, Travis could never work on things that required fine touch. His hands would freeze, become stiff and uncooperative, and he'd have to thaw them out by the fire. But Frank's knotted hands could work for hours in the cold. One night they found a radio in a pick-up truck a few streets away, and after several hours Frank managed to get it running on the juice remaining from the five tonne's battery, the final product being a static filled duration of exactly three minutes. They scanned the frequency range like scientists and never heard a single squibble. It was a particularly cold night.

"Why aren't we watching his apartment?" Travis asked.

"Because he will come to us," Frank answered.

"How do you know for sure?"

"Because I know."

Frank's arrogance, it was why things had come to a head. Travis wondered if Frank knew about his transgressions. If he did, he would never let on. It would be one to the back of the head, and Travis took comfort in that. But despite his betrayal, Travis still respected Frank. Business was business, and somehow he knew Frank would understand.

"I don't know, Frank. I don't trust the kid."

Frank took a bottle from the cabinet beside his desk, one he'd salvaged from the city. It was unopened and the label was worn away, but Travis remembered it was Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Frank had carried it for weeks without ever cracking the seal. He loved that bottle.

"Drink?" he asked.

"Jesus Frank, what's the occasion?"

"We're celebrating."

"The job's not done yet."

"But it's the perfect time to drink." He studied the bottle, holding it with an outstretched arm. "We found it together. It was with us when we left the city, and it's with us now as we wait for something that will change everything. It's the end of an era and the beginning of another. Now is the only time to open it. There's nothing like anticipation, when your heart beats a little faster. And I would only drink it with you, Travis." He opened the bottle and poured two glasses.

Travis held the glass under his nose and the aroma was powerful and different than the white liquor he was used to. It smelled faintly sweet and expensive, and reminded him of the time before the fall.

Frank said, "Been a long time now, that's for sure. Brings back a lot of memories, having a glass of whiskey. I never liked it then, but I took the bottle because it was the best. Some fancy

neighbourhood on the hill, you remember. Scotch was what rich men drank in their offices as they divided the world among themselves. I hated them.”

“How do you like it now?”

“It’s great,” Frank laughed. “And you, what you do remember?”

“Nothing special, nothing you’d be interested in.”

“Humour me, I’m feeling nostalgic.”

Travis looked out the bay windows. The weather was certain to turn. “I remember snow, Christmas, hanging lights on our yellow house outside the city. The snow was always deep on the reserve. Sometimes the drifts were so high you could reach the eaves without a ladder. That’s when I liked hanging lights. I loved winter when I was a kid.”

“That’s a good memory,” Frank said. He made little circles with the glass, the brown liquid swirling higher and higher. His smile faded. “Do you know how I know that Simon will come to my building?”

“No, Frank.”

“Because a man like him needs closure, can’t get by without it. He’s found Harry by now, and he’ll want to know why I did it. He won’t run because he needs to confront me. And when he does, he’ll either try to kill me or he’ll join me, but he’ll come. It’s better, don’t you see, than if we didn’t kill Harry, because then he would have no real reason to come back. He could change his mind, free the courier and leave. But now we are joined in the death of his friend, and he must make a choice. And when he comes here he’ll bring us the code.”

“So why not put a man on his apartment?”

“You’re missing the point, Travis. Simon will come to me of his own free will; it’s the way he’s built. He’s an honourable man, and they’re the easiest to predict. There are few of them

left. They're predictable but difficult at the same time, because in their fierce loyalty they are capable of anything. Men like you and I don't have loyalty. It's an abstract idea to us. We wonder how people could be so naive. You're just like me, Travis, only not as smart. If you were you would have killed me by now. I saw the jackal in you that day we met in the city. You were hungry, and you would have followed me into hell until you found something better, then you would have turned on me. That's just the way we are, and we can't change it. I came to understand myself a long time ago. The first man I ever killed was with a ball peen hammer, and after that they called me the carpenter. I've never felt bad about it, not once. I've tried and it doesn't work, because I know he had it coming."

"He'll try to kill you."

"Maybe, and that's his right. But he's coming to my building, where I'm in control. He has to feel safe, like he's coming home. If he sees that I don't trust him, then I've lost him. He needs to go through the metamorphosis on his own, just like you did. Do you remember, Travis?"

Travis stared into his glass, wanting to smash it in Frank's face, make him bleed. Travis could feel Frank reading his thoughts, looking at him knowingly, the way a father looks at his son. Frank the teacher, the father. Travis hated him now more than ever, but he could play the game. It was what he'd learned best from Frank.

"So you want another follower."

"If I don't get him, they will."

"You never gave me a choice, why do you give him one?"

"It was you who followed me, remember?"

"There was no other way."

“There’s always another way. If you didn’t want to kill Marciello, you didn’t have to. But I knew you would, I knew you wouldn’t say no to me. You were scared of being alone; you would have done anything.”

“I was just a kid.”

“You were a jackal then and you’re one now. I know you. You were never the same after that. I saw the change in you over the years, and I always knew it came from that moment.”

“I never wanted to kill him.”

“You see, I know you.” Frank downed his scotch and walked to the window.

Travis took a cigarette from Frank’s desk and lit it. He tossed the match into a glass ashtray on the desk. “I was always loyal to you. I’ve done everything you’ve asked, killed for you. I was always loyal.”

“You didn’t believe in it after Marciello,” Frank said, staring out the window. “You went through the motions.”

“For fifteen years?”

Frank nodded, “Yes.”

“Maybe you hardened me.”

“Could be, or maybe you always had it in you.”

“I never betrayed you.”

The view to the street was clouding with dusk and snow. The wind picked up and the snow was quick and fierce, whipping close to the building in eddies and currents, turning on itself, flicking at right angles as though jets of hot, unpredictable air were pulsing from the side of the building.

“Don’t worry,” Frank smiled. “The kid will be back soon, and then we’ll know for sure.”

He leaned on the window frame and Travis didn't see glass anymore, only Frank and the snow. It was Frank from that winter in the city, tall, skinny and young, his hands working as fervently as his mind, always one step ahead.

They'd huddled in the cold wreckage of a five tonne, and Frank promised Travis many things. And how could Travis not have followed him with the loyalty of a good dog? How could it have been any other way? He was young and impressionable and he wanted to survive. He was capable of anything.

## 46. The Fall

The final sounds Simon heard from Anthony's house were the terrified screams of Anthony's mother as the thugs raped her repeatedly, then beat her to death with something heavy and blunt. He found himself thinking about the objects in the kitchen, wondering what it was that finally silenced her pain and ended her life. And despite himself, he hoped that Anthony and his father were already dead when the blows were dealt, as he could not imagine witnessing what he'd just heard, let alone to his own mother. Hiding in the backyard behind the red canoe he was in shock, frozen, unable to process what was happening to his world.

Two weeks earlier they'd been watching the news when the power went down for good. The reporter had said that the water was everywhere. Coastal regions all over the world were washed out, and the water was steadily pouring inland with no signs of slowing down. Infrastructure was crumbling faster than it could be repaired. Communication modes were failing; cell phones and internet were down. People in positions of authority were abandoning their posts, choosing to save their families and themselves. There was no word from the government in days; order was dwindling, looting and violence widespread. People were fighting over what supplies remained in stores. The reporter had reminded her viewers that most cities have enough food supply to last two days, a timeframe that had long passed. This was occurring all over the world. There was no succinct explanation, only conjecture. It was global warming accelerated; the ice caps had melted in days and the world would soon be completely underwater. It was a polar shift—the flow of water and ocean currents had been disrupted, were being reversed. One distraught scientist said it was an earthquake in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, bigger than any that had ever occurred, and that the resulting tsunamis would go on for weeks; this was only the beginning. Many millions had died, millions more would follow. Any city

along any coastline was already underwater. The flood had made its way up the St. Lawrence, into the great lakes and all tributaries. There was, the tired-looking reporter had said moments before the television turned off, nowhere to hide.

Soon after this, survivors arrived from the city's core. The house was in a good neighbourhood on a big hill, the highest in the city, the only place without water. When the gang called to Anthony's father, demanding he give up their food and water, everything solidified in Simon's mind. The men outside were the type of men he'd known in India. Men like Dmitri and Bobby who would kill a boy to save their reputations. He could sense their satisfaction at getting revenge on the rich people who lived on the hill; he could see it in their gratified smiles. He knew it was men like this that he would have to hide from now. He knew that the weak would be weeded, goaded, and crushed, and for a brief moment he thanked Dmitri for having initiated him so early to the darkness of the world. And in those moments outside Anthony's house, it didn't matter to Simon how or why it had happened, but only that *was* happening, and that he must survive. This was where he was now, and how he'd gotten there didn't matter anymore.

After the gang killed Anthony's mother and the rest of the family, Simon knew what he had to do. He would go to the only place where he'd have a chance of survival—into the city's core where the water was deepest and the people were fewest. He waited for the cover of night before he took the canoe from behind the house, carried it to where the water met the tidy streets and yards of the good neighbourhood, and paddled into the heart of city. He saw burning candles where there were survivors on buildings' upper floors. He witnessed the great electrical fires that lit up the night sky like fireworks' displays, smoking interminably. He smelled the rot of a hundred thousand bodies, the city's decay. He heard screams and cries for help. He heard



violence being done, and knew there was nothing he could do about it. He thought about his parents at the cabin, and knew he could not help them.

He paddled around debris piles and bodies and wreckage to the shoreline of the vast river that had become an endless, terrifying lake. He searched for a tall building that was dark and quiet, and when he found one he paddled his canoe through a smashed picture window and tied it off on a metal banister. On the upper floors where there was no water he moved from empty residence to empty residence, gathering food and supplies. He wondered where the people who lived there had gone, if they had tried to flee in the water or if they were on the hill with the bad men. Either way, he figured, their chances were about the same. He decided to make his camp in an apartment suite on the building's top floor, and there he lit a candle and ate a meal of canned ham and Wasa Bread, and by the brightness of the moon watched the city drown. That night he didn't sleep, and in the morning the sun rose over the city, reflecting off the choppy waters, and the scale of devastation became evident. East, only the tops of tall buildings reached above the surface, and beyond that a shimmer of black water and then, the hill. To the west the river had expanded into a great sea that rolled with debris, oil slicks and filth as far as the eye could see. He spent the day searching every apartment that wasn't submerged, scavenging everything he could, and then sorted and secured his goods in backpacks near his canoe in case he had to move fast.

There were few people in the city; he believed that most had fled or perished. The water, threatening to all others, had become his life vest, a buffer to the hill. At night he searched surrounding buildings and gathered supplies, during the day he rested. The people he saw never stayed for good, frightened of the water or the unknown or the multitude of dead souls. They came in busted boats and scavenged until dusk, and never spent the night.

It was months before the water receded, and even then it didn't happen quickly. It was a slow drain, marked by inches on the wall and the stink of decay brought into the heat of the afternoon sun. When the water was gone and the river flowed at something that resembled a normal level, life returned to the city. Slowly, in the early weeks, and then more frequently. Simon wondered what they thought they were returning to, what they believed the city had to offer. He watched them arrive in filthy clothes, carrying backpacks and guns. The families and small groups came first, and for awhile things were peaceful. They searched the buildings for food and water, the same as he had done. He couldn't fault them for that. When they entered his building he avoided them, not wanting to draw attention to himself. He concealed his cache of food and supplies in clever spots, and had become adept at hiding. He snuffed out his desire for human contact by telling himself the only way he would make it was on his own. Relationships were heavy boxes too difficult to carry when you were running for your life. He had enough food and water to last a few months, but the people kept coming. Hundreds now, he figured, and he wondered how long the city could sustain them all. A small family had taken up in his building. They never came up to his floor because Simon had blocked the stairwell with debris, but he knew that eventually they would find him and he would have to leave the city. But that would happen sooner than he anticipated.

Simon heard them before he saw them, coming from the hill. When they arrived on his street, he counted twenty-three men. They had sticks and pipes and banged on the husks of cars and lampposts, anything that made noise. They were announcing their arrival. It was a humid

summer evening, and Simon could feel their heat and moisture being pushed up the street as they approached, as though they breathed in unison, the hot breath of an angry beast.

In the middle of the intersection below Simon's building, a man stood on the roof of an ambulance, surveying the ruins. He was a small man with dark hair and a stony glare, and Simon could tell by the way the others deferred to him that he was their leader, and that he was feared. He talked to a few men that had gathered, and then small groups spread out to search the surrounding streets. The man looked skyward, looked at every building and window within his field of vision, and Simon knew he was claiming the neighbourhood as his own.

The next day when the sun was high, four men entered Simon's building. Simon crept down the stairwell to where he'd barricaded his floor, and waited. In his hand he held a hunting knife and he thought about how he'd use it, which way he would thrust the blade. But the thought of confrontation scared him, and if the men made it through his barricade, he would run and hide, but he needed to know what they were up to and where they were going. He could hear stairwell doors slamming shut as they entered each floor, searched it, and moved on. Simon knew they wouldn't find anything of value because the apartments below had already been cleaned out. Finally, they made it to the barricade. Simon heard them talking, considering what to do.

"Looks like this was put here on purpose," said one of the men. "We should move it, see what's up there."

"Looks like a big pain in the ass to move," said another.

"You heard what he said. Every floor."

"Alright, but first let's check this floor here."

Simon heard the men opening doors as they walked down the hallway. When they were about halfway through, they found the apartment where the family was hiding. He heard the screams of a woman and a girl, shouting and banging, and then it was quiet. He strained to listen, but the sounds were far away and muffled. He heard more screaming, and crying. After awhile, he didn't hear the men anymore, just the women, whose whimpers were distant and weak, nearly extinguished.

The men came back into the stairwell talking and laughing, pumped with adrenaline. They were nervous, though, like dogs caught pissing on the floor, and Simon could sense the tension. "Two years since I had a piece of ass," said one of the men. "And what a sweet piece of ass."

"Gotta get while the gettin' is good," another man said.

"Hey," said the first man, he was addressing one of their group. "What's your problem?"

No response.

"I'm talking to you!"

The voice that answered was younger. A teenager, Simon thought. "You didn't have to kill them."

"You heard what the bossman said. No survivors, just supplies. Now we bring down this gear, and we search the upper floor, could be more gear up there."

"Could be more of everything," said one of the men, and they all had a good laugh.

"You didn't have to rape them," the younger voice said.

"What did you say?"

"I said you didn't have to rape them."

“I heard what you said. Where the fuck do you think you are right now? Who the fuck you think you’re rolling with? We take what we need, and we survive. No room for pussies here, man. Those people in there wouldn’t have lasted another week in the city. You seen how it is out there. The gangs are all making moves, man, staking out their territory, and that means we got to be hard. Harder than them, you understand what I’m saying? Because the second you show any weakness, or *concern*, your neck gets cut from ear to ear. And if they don’t do it, bossman will. Now pipe down with that shit before somebody hears you talkin’ like that. If you can’t talk hard, don’t talk. Let’s get this shit downstairs. I gotta feeling about that floor.”

Before the men had descended a single flight of stairs, Simon was already in his apartment, retrieving his emergency bag—an old army backpack that had essential supplies and enough canned and preserved food for two weeks. It had one bottle of clean water and a small pot for boiling. He looked at the rest of his food, months worth. The thought of leaving it for the men downstairs was even worse than leaving it behind. So he gathered as much as he could and dumped it down the garbage chute. He went to the stairwell and began dismantling his barricade. He’d built it to make it appear more difficult to move than it actually was, so that when he wanted to get out, all he had to do was remove a few key pieces and he could slip through a small hole in the debris pile. He squeezed through, put a broken coffee table back to where it was at the front to hide his movements, and slipped into the hallway just below the barricade. He entered the first apartment, closed the door to a crack, and waited.

The men approached the barricade. They moved the tables and chairs and broken drywall out of the way, and then they were on his floor. Simon was about to head into the stairwell and go down, but instead he turned and walked down the hallway. Halfway down, a door was

partially open. He had a bad feeling, something inside telling him not to enter, but he pushed the door open anyway.

The first thing he saw was the mother. She was unclothed and lying face-down on the floor, head ninety degrees to her body. The side of her face was badly bruised, blood had run from her ear. Scratches and bruises ran along her back and sides; it looked like her ribs had been broken. The father was on the floor, curled up with his arms around his legs. His face was bludgeoned so badly that Simon couldn't make out where the eyes, nose or mouth were. Beneath his arms, in his lap, was the body of an infant boy, no more than eighteen months.

He continued through the apartment, which the family had tried to make into a home. The dining table had a red cloth over it, and there were dishes in the drying rack beside the sink. There was a stack of books on the coffee table, notebooks and pens, and a family portrait. Simon thought of his own family, the log-cabin up north.

He walked into the bedroom, and saw the girl. She was a teenager, about sixteen. She was on the bed, exposed from the waist down. Her black t-shirt was pushed up her back, and her short dark hair was matted against her head, half of it saturated with blood. She had large bruises on her back and legs that stood out against her pale skin. Blood was smeared across the bed sheets and covered her hands. Simon stared at her for a long time thinking she wasn't real, just a figment of his imagination. When he realized that she was, he thought he should help her somehow, cover her up at least. But as the shock set in he was unable to move, couldn't lift his legs. He felt a great rush of sickness and vomited. He clung to the doorframe, retching over and over until there was nothing left in his guts but yellow bile that dripped from his mouth, the taste and smell of it making him sicker. He stumbled out of the room, collapsed on the floor beside the father and son. He pulled his knees to his chest and cried, rocking back and forth. He cried for

the young girl, and her family. He wished he would've met them; he could have warned them. Maybe they'd still be alive if he didn't hide to save himself. He cried for his own mother and father, repeating their names over and over. He wanted to lie down and never get up. He knew that the world outside the building was the worst kind of hell, and he was terrified.

He cried until he couldn't cry anymore, raised his head, and on top of the fridge directly in front of him was a red plastic container. The room had been cleaned out by the men, but there was this red container above eye level, which they must have missed. He wiped the tears from his face and walked to the fridge. He picked the container up and saw that it was a full bottle of lighter fluid. He stood there for a moment looking at the container and the family that was now destroyed, and then he wasn't thinking anymore.

He entered the stairwell. The men were on the upper floor. He opened the door and saw that the hallway was empty. He took a bookshelf from the scattered debris pile and wedged it in the doorway. He piled tables, chairs, anything that would burn on top of the bookshelf until the doorway was crammed from floor to ceiling. He doused the pile with the lighter fluid, emptying the whole the bottle, and pulled a box of matches from his backpack. One of the men entered the hallway from Simon's suite, and Simon saw that it wasn't a man, but a boy. It must have been the teenager he'd heard talking in the stairwell. They locked eyes, and when the boy realized what Simon was going to do, his face contorted into fear. He yelled for his friends, but before they came Simon had already struck the match and tossed it on the pile, which erupted into a great fireball.

He exited out the back of the building, away from where the men were gathered at the intersection. He never looked back to see if smoke was pouring out of the windows on the top floor. He knew there was only the one exit, because the top floor was a single suite and had only

one set of stairs. But he also knew that the fire wouldn't spread beyond the stairwell as everything around it was concrete. If they were smart, they'd block the bottom of the apartment door with a wet towel and wait for the fire to burn out. He never knew if they made it out, and he never wanted to know. Any guilt he might have had was extinguished by the image of the dead, brutalized girl, which was burned forever into his memory. She was all that he could see. It was the least he could do for her.

He ran to where the river met the city. The water level was still high, spilling over the old break wall and onto the boulevard. It had always been a wide river, but the current was faster than he'd ever seen it. There were big waves such that he'd never seen on a river before, and he didn't know if he could make it across. But he couldn't be like the boy in the building, he'd rather die than go along with men like that. And he didn't want to die just yet. Whatever was across the river had to be better than this, he thought, and he decided to take his chances.

On the shore he found the remains of an old oak chest of drawers, smashed against the concrete break wall. The back panel was still intact, and floated well. He secured his bag with a nylon yellow rope, waded into the water and paddled it like a surf board into the river. The current quickly took hold of him, and he drifted downstream at a great speed. He paddled hard, but the waves repeatedly splashed over the top of his raft. Many times he swallowed water; a couple of times he nearly drowned. The river had deep swells, as though the tide had made it hundreds of miles upriver, and was battling the current. He would dip to the bottom of a wave, and all he could see was a wall of black choppy water, then he would peak and the far shore would become visible, a mud flat. He continued like this for over an hour, not knowing if the next wave would be the one to plunge him into the unforgiving black water where he knew he would surely drown.



When he finally got to the other side of the river he was many kilometres downstream, the city skyline a blur in the distance. The shore had been mostly planed from the flood, and the ground was an expanse of brown mud. There were no trees or cover, and he was exposed. He untied his backpack, slipped it on his shoulders, and with each step sank to his knees. He walked until he reached a toppled building partly submerged in mud and sat down, exhausted. He leaned against the crumbling red brick wall and drank from his water bottle. The land in front of him was indiscernible. He'd been across the river before, but now he recognized nothing. Everything was buried in mud. He could see, though, where the river was beginning to wash clean the old River Road, spots where the asphalt showed through. He knew there was a town not too far away, and that's where he would go.

Sticking out of a patch of dark mud and soil near the building, he saw a bit of green. It was the sprout of a new tree, a poplar or maybe an alder, its bright leaves turned towards the sun. This was the first tree he'd seen in nearly two years; it was a good sign and he smiled. He stood and adjusted his pack, ready to make the trek to the town, when everything went black.

The men standing over him were slim and wiry. He thought there were four of them, until he realized he was seeing double. They each had a gun, pointed in Simon's face. One of the men leaned forward and snapped his fingers, and Simon's eyes adjusted. The back of his head throbbed. He felt a gash behind his ear, looked at the blood on his fingers.

"Why don't you just kill him?" one of the men said, grimacing.

"Information," said the other, the one who'd done the snapping. He looked at Simon. His face was lean but well-fed. "How'd you get across?"

"Raft," Simon said. "I took a raft."

“Why did you leave the city?”

Simon thought about the girl. His head ached. “Gangs. Men are moving in. Lots of them. Not safe anymore.”

The man who wanted to kill Simon pressed the barrel of his gun to Simon’s temple.

“Betcha you’re glad you came over here then, aren’t you.”

“Anyone with you?” the other man asked. Simon shook his head. The man shrugged and turned to his partner. “So what are we gonna do with him?”

“You know the rules. Nobody crosses.”

“But he’s just a kid. Look at him. Hey kid, how old are you?”

“Seventeen,” Simon said.

The man looked at his friend. “Seventeen. He says he’s alone.”

“So what are you going to do? Bring him back to Frank, plead your case? You don’t even know this kid. Put one in his head, man. Let’s move on.”

The man turned to Simon, cocked the hammer on his forty-five. “Sorry, kid. Nothing personal eh?”

Simon squeezed his eyes shut. He thought he was going to hear a loud bang, when instead he heard another voice telling them to stop.

The man was older. He was barrel-chested and heavy, with a gold chain around his neck. “What have we got here?” he asked. He was in charge.

“Some kid from the city. Crossed the river.”

The man stared at Simon with cold, penetrating eyes. “Did you question him?”

“Yes.”

“What did you ask him?”

“About the city, how he got across.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He took a raft over. He was running from the gangs.”

“And that’s everything you got?”

The two men looked at each other. “That’s all we got.”

The man with the gold chain shook his head in disappointment. “But we already know all that. Piss poor job of questioning.” He nodded downriver. “Get back to your patrol.”

“What about him?”

“I’ll take care of him. You worry about the river.”

The two men left, and the man sat on a log beside Simon. He looked in Simon’s bag, handed him the bottle of water. He placed the hunting knife on the ground in front of them. “Drink,” he said gruffly. “You have anything else to tell me? You have friends that already made it across? Friends waiting to cross? You planning to stick that knife in my back the second I look away?”

“No,” Simon said. He stared at the ground by his feet, afraid to look the man in the eye.

“You’re scared, kid?”

Simon nodded.

“That’s okay, fine to be scared. But look at that river. You crossed that son of a bitch, and you made it in one piece. Didn’t have any choice though, did you. No, I understand. I know what it’s like over there. I crossed too, awhile back.”

“They were going to kill me,” Simon said. “Are you?”

The man looked hard at Simon. “They were going to kill you because those are their orders. And they always follow orders. That’s why this place runs so well. Our job is to protect

this shore from anyone coming from the city. Those gangs over there, we want to keep them there. Understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm not in a gang. I'm alone."

"I believe you, son. I really do. But I don't make the rules. I shouldn't even be talking to you. Just a quick one in the head, and move on. That's how we do things. But I look at you, and I see a boy who survived two years in that shithole, then crossed that river. Either of which is more of a feat than most grown men could handle. That tells me something about your character, and your intelligence. And I don't kill kids. I've never done it, and I never will. Won't let it happen in my presence. But now leaves the question of what to do with you." The man sighed. He looked at the river, the city in the distance. "You know I had a son once; he'd be about your age now. You remind me of him. I'll give you a choice. You can get on your raft, and head back across the river to where you came from, or you can come with me and we'll see about getting you into town. The choice is yours. But if anyone else sees you on this side of the river, they will kill you. That is a certainty."

Simon looked at the two men who far away now, patrolling the shoreline. "What about them?"

"Don't worry about them. It's me who has to convince him now."

"There are people in the town?"

"We call it South Town. Run by a man named Frank Baxter. He saved my life, saved all of our lives. Without him we'd be dead. Those gangs in the city, he protects us from them. He brought in order. More than I've seen in a very long time."

"Is there food?"

The man laughed. “Yes, there’s food. Mud’s all cleaned up too, people living in the houses, walking around free. It’s the safest place to be around here.”

“It sounds great,” Simon said. He couldn’t fathom that such a place could exist.

“So what do you say kid, are you coming with me?”

Simon had no reason to trust the man, but crossing the river back into the city was not an option. Even if he made it across, there was nothing good over there. And if it were true, what the man said sounded better than anything he’d seen since it all began. One thing was clear—the man had saved his life. He thought about the family and the young girl; there were still some good people about. There were people who wanted to help. He could’ve helped that family if he wasn’t so afraid. He could’ve warned them, they could’ve held up together, escaped the building before the men came. The man standing in front him—maybe he wasn’t a saint, but he had some good in him, Simon was sure. Maybe he is like me, Simon thought, tired of just saving his own skin.

“Doesn’t seem like much of a choice,” Simon said. “I’ll go with you.”

“Glad to hear it. My name’s Harry, what’s yours?”

“Simon.”

“Nice to meet you, Simon.” He looked at the gash on Simon’s head. “How’s that crack on your head? Are you able to walk?”

“I’ll live,” Simon said. “I can walk.”

“Come on then, let’s get moving. We have some ground to cover before nightfall, and you look like you could use a good meal.”

They stood, and Simon noticed the young sapling again. “First tree I’ve seen since I left the hill. Thought they all washed away.”

“Most did. But there’s high ground west of here, where many remained. Once the water receded, their seedlings and pollen began to spread again. Nature is remarkable, isn’t it? The same with the mud, more of it washes away each time it rains. In twenty years you won’t recognize this place. Just wait until you see the town, you won’t believe your eyes.”

They walked beside the river, on top of the eroding mud that covered the old River Road. Simon saw black earth, more young trees, and every so often he heard birds. Harry was right, life was returning. As the sun began to descend into the distant hills, the western sky before him was huge and warm, a meld of yellow, orange and red. And as they walked he felt a lightness that he hadn’t felt since he was a child on the boardwalk with his father, watching the cheenavala that rose and descended like a tide, their movements like an endless cycle of nature, like the nature of man himself.

## 47. Entry

The town was quiet and battened down, closed up tight. Windows showed just a flicker of candle light and the market was still. As was their custom when bad storms rolled in, the priests opened the cathedral doors to all on the steps, then closed them to the weather outside.

Their tracks were long behind them in the failing light, like footprints on a white sand beach arcing into the distance, towards the square. Anton kept his chin low and squinted into the storm. A good night for the business at hand, he thought. His hands were fists in his pockets, flexing and relaxing, keeping the blood flowing. He could feel the loaded clips pressing against his ankles, hidden under the heavy leather of his old military boots, and was conscious of how they affected his stride—a slight limp, hardly noticeable in this weather.

Frank's thirteenth floor appeared as a foggy light in the sky, seamless and transient. Slowly, the building took shape around it. Anton spotted the guards at the base of the building—they weren't following procedure. They were huddled around a steel barrel with their shotguns slung over their shoulders, warming their hands in the glow of a small fire. Smoke from the barrel twisted up and out in feathery wisps. Anton recognized the gamey smell of deer meat.

In the darkness, Simon tied Anton's hands behind his back. Anton looked to the tower and thought about Frank. He had been the most terrifying man in the world to Anton until Anton went to the city, then he was just another man who wouldn't see it coming. That was the most important lesson Anton learned over there, that anyone can get hit. It doesn't matter how rich or powerful you are or what you've done, sooner or later everyone gets hit. It was the city's one redeeming quality. Simon pulled his forty-five, pointed it into Anton's back and they walked into the light.

The guards saw them and buzzed into action, spreading out in the triangle formation Anton remembered from his days hiding in the condo across the street. An expanse of pristine snow separated them from the guards and reflected the building's glow like a flawless silver blanket. Anton walked ahead, dragging his boots in the snow to camouflage their slight bulk. When they were eight feet out, the guard aimed his shotgun at Anton's chest, indicating they were close enough. He stared at them from behind the bead, saying nothing, waiting for them to speak first.

Simon removed his hood. "I'm Simon Gray, here to see Frank."

The guard's face had few wrinkles and a patchy beard, and his eyes were resolute. He was young but confident, and Anton knew he would not hesitate to shoot either of them if the situation turned bad.

He took a long, hard look at Simon and said, "Yeah, I know you." Then he turned to Anton, pulled off his hat. "But I don't know him."

"A courier from North Town. Frank's expecting him."

The guard pointed to the ground a few feet away. "Stand over there," he said, and Simon obeyed. The guard knelt behind Anton, and tested the rope around his wrists. "Is he dangerous?"

"He killed Dan."

The guard came around front to get a better look at the courier's face. "Dan was tough, this guy doesn't look so tough."

"Ambush," Simon said. "Didn't tie his hands up good enough, son of a bitch got em free and stuck a knife in his back."

"Is that so." Again the guard yanked the rope around Anton's wrists, looking sceptically at Simon. "But he didn't get you."



He began searching Anton and Simon said, “No need for that. I’ve disarmed him already.”

“Procedure,” the guard said.

He started with Anton’s pockets, moved to his waist, and then worked his way down each arm, searching carefully from shoulder to wrist. Anton focused on the tower and Frank’s office, concentrated on being passive and uninteresting, and he was surprised how quickly the guard’s interest waned. It was a barely perceptible change in behaviour, the smallest hint of indifference and a sign of inexperience. When the guard knelt, Anton knew his heart wasn’t in it anymore. He was a predator and Anton’s passivity aroused no predatory instincts—there was no battle to win.

The guard’s laboured breathing clouded in the freezing air as he searched Anton’s legs. He was thorough, and would follow procedure despite his feelings on the matter because his training and muscle memory overshadowed everything else.

Simon had said the guards wouldn’t let him upstairs with a *loaded* gun, they’d make him leave the ammunition only. He’d said he could talk his way out of the second gun if the guards searched him, if it wasn’t loaded, but if they found the clips they were both dead. He’d said Anton’s boots was the best place to hide them, the last place the guards would look. You’ve got to carry them, Simon had said, we just can’t let them find them, we have to distract them.

Now the guard was closing in. If he reached Anton’s boots it was all over. Simon might get off one shot, maybe two, but the other guards would gun him down in seconds. Simon had to distract the guard, it was the only way. But Simon wasn’t moving.

Anton prepared himself for a fight, visualizing what needed to be done: a knee to the guard’s head, and come down hard with all his weight. If Simon took the other guard, they might have a chance at the third.

The guard was right above Anton's boot now. Anton would only get one go, and knew he better make it count. He tensed his muscles, about to draw back when Simon stepped forward and said, "Frank is waiting for me. We don't have time for this."

The guard looked hard at Simon. "We have orders."

"I have orders too. Search him if you want, but I'm going up."

Simon made for the entrance.

The other guard stepped forward, brought his shotgun to Simon's chin. "What the fuck are you doing? You want a hole in your head?"

Simon raised his hands, still holding the forty-five. "I told you I disarmed him. So waste your own time searching him. When you're finished, send him up to the thirteenth floor where Frank will be wondering what took you so long. What's your name again?"

The guard hesitated. "Nobody said anything about a courier."

"That's because it's important. Nobody knows."

The guard frowned as he dusted the snow off his pants, the prospect of searching the courier clearly less attractive to him now. It wasn't worth it if Frank would come down hard. He looked at the smoking barrel, his interrupted meal. The bluff had worked. He pointed at the gun in Simon's hand. "But that stays here."

Simon shook his head impatiently, pretending to be upset because he had to surrender some sense of victory to the guard. He released the clip into his hand, emptied the cartridge from the chamber and handed them over, but he kept the gun. "It shoots straight, let me keep it. It's no good without rounds anyway."

"Fine." The guard said. He turned to his partner. "Search him too, can't be too careful."

The lobby was cold and dirty. A pair of fluorescent lights flickered intermittently, and snow collected in a little drift where it had blown under the door. It reminded Anton of the dilapidated buildings in the city and not a place where Frank Baxter would live. Frank purposely had it looking shabby, an attempt at humility that Anton knew was false because he'd seen the opulence of Frank's office from the condo across the street and heard his generator fire up. At one time the building would have been decorated with expensive furniture and adornments, and Anton imagined it to be an extravagant affair, one of those condos from twenty years ago that only the rich could afford, complete with waterfall, brass trimmings and twelve-foot mirrors. Before the fall, South Town was a popular getaway for the city's affluent who bought up condos and water front property to escape their weekday life across the river. Buildings like this one had priced many locals out of the market, and regular people found themselves unable to afford the town they'd grown up in. It was a problem Marciello had talked about often, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the return of a feudal system of haves and have nots. Marciello had always said that the fall created a level playing field, but men like Baxter sought to destroy it.

"Frank is on the thirteenth floor," the guard said. "The man upstairs will take you to him." He pushed Anton inside the elevator. "You know, I always liked Dan. It's too bad about that."

The elevator door closed.

They had twenty seconds to prepare. Simon untied Anton's hands, and Anton retrieved the clips from his boots. Simon handed the second gun to Anton, and they both loaded their guns, and stuck them in the back of their pants. Simon made a couple of loose passes with the rope around Anton's wrists, making a false knot.

The elevator door opened to a guard standing in front of a small bench. He looked straight at Anton. “Who’s he?”

“He’s the courier,” Simon said. “Frank’s expecting him.”

“I trust the boys downstairs secured him.”

“Of course. He’s tied up good.”

The guard pointed to the doorway at the end of the hall. “You know the door.” He turned to the bench, and Simon pulled his gun and brought it down hard on his temple. The guard crumpled, and Simon eased him to the ground.

“I’ll do the talking,” Simon said. “Just like we said. But give me the signal when you’re gonna make your move. Make sure you give me the signal so I know.”

Anton nodded. He’d visualized the moment many times. He would shoot Frank in the chest and watch him die, but only after he told him why. Frank wouldn’t be expecting it because he trusted his guards, the system he’d put in place, and he trusted Simon. But all systems are flawed to a degree, it’s just a case of finding the seam. Preparation and surprise is what separates us from them, Marciello had always said. Nothing is more powerful than information, knowing something the other person doesn’t. Anton was prepared now as he pictured Frank’s office on the other side of the door. He thought about his movements if Frank was to the left or to the right, or if there were more than two men inside.

Nothing to do now but play it out to the end. His life had revolved around this singular moment, he’d prepared for it since the day Frank Baxter killed his brother, and as Simon knocked on the door Anton couldn’t stop a smile. This was for Marciello, and Anton hoped he was watching now.

## 48. Inside

Simon had always loved Eva, and he had always hated Frank. But people will do anything to survive, when their instinctual natures are provoked and the line between necessity and excess is blurred. Eva was right when she'd said he was no killer, that he only played one in his other life. Proving her right meant killing, and he was fine with that. He could live with himself if that's what it took. But he couldn't leave South Town and pretend to forget. He had worked for Frank, enabled a system that hurt countless people, and he had to set it right. Simon needed freedom from his past; he needed to be one thing only.

Travis Parker was standing in Frank's office wearing a black suit, holding a glass of good-smelling whiskey. He was surprised to see Simon, and let slip a look of bewilderment that lasted only a second, long enough for Simon to realize that he wasn't supposed to be there. Simon knew right then that the priest intended to kill him once he'd gotten the code, that Simon was never to leave the cathedral alive. This was their plan all along, and he gave it away so obviously that Simon wondered how much Frank knew.

"Where's Dan?" Travis asked.

"Dead. But I have the courier, that's who you want isn't it?"

Travis looked at Anton like he was a bug to be stepped on. "Did he kill him?"

"Yes."

"Do you have the code?"

"No, he wouldn't give it up."

"So come inside, and we'll get it out of him."

Frank was sitting on the edge of his desk smoking a brown cigarette and holding a glass of the same whiskey Travis had. Simon looked at the uncapped bottle on the desk. Frank asked if he wanted a drink; Simon said he would love one.

Frank said, "I always reward my men after a job well done. Get used to it." He looked at Anton. "I'd give you one too but Travis wouldn't like that. Dan was his friend."

"How did he do it?" Travis asked. He was standing behind them, near the door, and Simon could feel his anxiety.

"Cut his throat," Simon said over his shoulder.

"I'll be sure to repay the favor."

"A North Town courier in my office," Frank said. "I never thought I'd see the day. You hear that, courier, Travis wants blood. I can't say that I blame him. It's a shame we didn't meet before this, I could have used you. I can tell you would've fit right in. It's a bit late for that now. The code, that's all I want. Give me the code and I can help you, but only if you make it easy for me. Do that and I might be able to call him off. I don't care where you're from or what you did. I know what motivates people. Whoever gets that satellite working first, well, he's the one. Knowledge is more important than anything. Staying loyal to Fisher doesn't make sense anymore. Give me the code and make it easy for yourself."

Anton didn't say anything, eyes fixed on the floor near Frank's feet. Simon thought he was going to go for it right then, but Anton didn't give the signal. Too many people watching.

"Alright," Frank said. "We'll do it your way. Simon, come over here and get your drink. Let Travis and the courier get acquainted. Johnny Walker Blue, the best money can buy. Ask Travis how long I've had that bottle, how many weeks we carried it through the city, and now we open it in celebration."

Frank walked behind the desk, but Simon didn't move. He felt Travis behind him, itching to get at Anton, and he knew he had to stall him. "I won't drink with you Frank," he said. "Not until you tell me why you killed Harry."

Frank sighed and looked out the window. The snow was coming down hard now, easy to make out even through the room's reflection. He took his time like the question weighed on him heavy, like he was ashamed. He was good, a real con. "It had nothing to do with you. And I don't hold you accountable for his actions. What's done is done. I didn't want it to come to that, Simon, but I had no choice. Harry was a traitor, he was making a deal with the priests."

"You're wrong, Frank. He was no traitor, and he never talked to the priests."

"Traitor's only a word. There's a fine line between what a man does and what he wants to do in his heart. Few men know where that line exists; I do. The truth is that I couldn't trust him anymore. He knew too much. I know he was talking to one of my men, and if he wasn't talking to the priests he would have sooner or later. These are the types of decisions a man in my position needs to make, decisions for the good of the community, always for the good of the community."

"He was a talker. You didn't have to kill him. He never made a play against you in fifteen years."

"But he would have. You don't think I know what the people are saying? The priests are moving against me, which makes this moment even more pivotal. Either you're with me or you're against me, and if you're against me then I can't help you. Do you understand? It always starts with a conversation, that's the genesis of treason. He would have sided with them sooner or later. You have to understand that, Simon. His time was up, it was written all over his face. You know what I'm talking about. He was an old man who had lost his way and they are the most

dangerous. They see their clock ticking down and feel they must repent before it's too late. I wasn't going to let that happen. But you don't need him anymore. He was a middleman, and now you work directly for me. It's much better this way. Nobody will touch you now."

All lies, but it didn't matter. Soon he would never have to listen to Frank again. He looked at Travis who'd taken off his suit jacket, folded it over the back of one of Frank's leather chairs, and rolled up his sleeves. Travis smiled at Anton trying to get a rise out of him. He had that kamikaze look, one Simon had seen before on Frank's men and men from the Kochi drug gangs, men like Rennie and Dmitri who saw as far as their next job and have no respect for life, who inflict the most amount of hurt possible before they come to their own violent end. There would be no mercy for Anton, only violence, even if he gave them what they wanted, especially if he gave them what they wanted. Frank looked at Anton, he knew what was coming and he was enjoying it. It made Simon sick to think of how Harry must have died, the helplessness and inevitability he must have felt. But Harry had accepted his fate, could be it was his own method of redemption. That was the power Frank held, that a man like Harry was willing to die without a fight, figured the odds were too stacked against him to even try. Frank must be stopped because he would never stop.

"You ready?" Travis asked.

Anton looked up, but he stared at Frank, not Travis.

"Over here," Travis said. "Frank's not going to help you."

Finally, Anton looked at Travis. He started to laugh. He laughed and laughed and Travis got mad and came at Anton with that viciousness known so well in South Town. But Anton's hands were still tied. If Travis attacked him now he would discover the gun and it would be over; Simon had to make a move.



He walked to Frank's desk and picked up the glass of whiskey. The brown liquid tasted like nothing he'd ever had before. It was strong and smooth, powerful. It was what the rich men drank before the fall, in their offices like this one and their nice suits, talking flippantly about things that had profound effects on people's lives. And finally Simon realized what his parents were after with their farm and their seclusion. He had never clearly understood it before this moment, that all they wanted was a peaceful place where they could be free to make a living as they saw fit. They wanted to be free from men like Baxter, who destroyed the world with insatiable greed. Back then it was a radical idea, but in this stripped down world it made perfect sense. Because Frank Baxter or Father John could have been anyone before the fall, successful men with careers, their murderous souls manifesting in other ways, the other self that takes away the true will of the person, replacing it with environmentally imposed ideals. And here they were with such a chance of freedom, rid of the shackles of materialism, and still they couldn't get it right. So maybe, Simon thought, violence and greed are human nature, maybe we are doomed regardless.

He slammed the drink back, the liquid burning the back of his throat. He turned to Frank, giving his best sincere look, and ever the con-man he said, "It wasn't Harry siding with them, it was Travis."

## 49. Room Control

The kid was fucking things up. He was drinking Frank's good scotch and had no right to that bottle. He hadn't been with Frank since the beginning, fighting to stay alive in those rat-infested winters across the river. He hadn't carried that bottle for weeks like Travis had. No code, and Dan was dead; they should be stringing him up, not rewarding him. Travis remembered why he'd turned on Frank in the first place—the man had gone soft. Travis hated the kid, wanted to kill him right then. Father John too but first he had to deal with the kid. He had to make Frank see.

"You're a liar," Travis said calmly, though everything inside him wanted to pummel the kid into oblivion.

"That's not what Father John told me," Simon said.

"Why would I do that? Why would I betray Frank?"

Simon gave his best smug look and if Travis didn't know any better he would've thought he was deliberately trying to provoke him. "I don't know. Maybe you're unsatisfied."

"Unsatisfied. You little fuck." Travis felt the rage burning inside him and couldn't control it. He grabbed Simon by the hood of his sweater, landing two hard shots to the face before Frank yelled at him to stop. Travis let him go, driving his knee into the Simon's ribs on the way down.

"That's enough Travis," Frank said. "We're going to hear him out."

"No, Frank, I ain't listening to this. I'm going to kill him."

Simon was hurt bad. There was cut above his eye and he held his ribs, probably broken. But it wasn't enough; Travis needed to hurt him more. He needed to teach the kid a lesson in

humility, and Frank had to witness it. His days of taking orders were over. It was time they saw whom they were dealing with.

“Sit down,” Frank said. “We’re going to hear him out.” This time Frank had his gun in his hand, resting on the table. Travis never saw him pull it; Frank’s speed was surprising. It was the first time Frank had ever pointed a gun at him. He was buying the kid’s story.

Travis did like Frank said, the adrenaline pumping through his system, pulse pounding in his ears like his head was going to explode. He licked the coppery-tasting blood from his bleeding knuckles, not wanting to ruin his good suit.

Slowly, Simon got to his feet. He looked at Travis like where did that come from as he steadied himself on the corner of Frank’s oak desk. “It wasn’t Harry talking with them all this time Frank, it was Travis. When I went to cathedral and found Harry, Father John was there, and he knew things only a handful of people know, about the hard drive, the satellite. He tried to convince me it was Harry, but I knew the truth, just like I know it now. He wanted me to give him the code, said he would get the hard drive. Tell me, if he’s with Harry, how’s he going to get the hard drive if Harry’s dead? It doesn’t make sense because Travis is his man inside, he’s your traitor. I wasn’t supposed to come out of that cathedral alive. They were gonna get the code before it got to you, then they were gonna kill you. That’s why Dan worked the courier over in the safe house, that’s why Dan’s dead. Frank, you’re going to believe what your gut tells you, but I know your right hand man is doing a deal behind your back. He wants you out. But you know this already, that’s why you’ve pulled your gun.”

“No!” Travis yelled. “He’s lying, Frank, don’t listen to him. Let me put a bullet in his head and end this now.”

Frank stood. “Travis . . . you shoot him and you’re next. Simon, I need more than your word. Travis and I go back a lot of years.”

“Bring the priest here,” Simon said. “That will be proof enough.”

The shot fired before Travis knew what happened. Then the courier was standing with a gun in his hand and Frank was sitting in his chair, a red circle materializing on Frank’s white shirt, high up on the left shoulder. All Travis could think was where did that gun come from.

Frank put his fingers over the hole and gasped in pain as the blood streamed down his wrist in thin lines. He looked at Simon, who was holding a gun too, but it was aimed at Travis; it didn’t make sense.

The cigarette fell from Frank’s hand and his left arm hung limp, like the muscle was torn clear off. “Shoot him, Simon!” Frank yelled.

“Shut up,” said the courier. “You talk too much.”

Frank winced, the pain killing him. He looked at the gun on his desk. It was so close, but he was left handed and would never make it with a bullet in his shoulder. The courier had the gun up high, the sights trained on Frank’s head, knew what he was doing, wasn’t going to miss. Frank acknowledged that.

“Does it hurt, Frank?” the courier said.

“Shoot him, Simon,” Frank said. “Do it now.”

But Simon still had his gun on Travis, not taking his eyes off him. So Travis sat there, staring back at him, waiting for a break in the kid’s concentration when he would come at him with everything he had, bury his shoulder into his chest and crush the life out of him. It didn’t matter if the kid got one on him, as long as he took him down.

“This isn’t about Simon,” the courier said. “This is about me and you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know who you are.”

“Yes you do. A long time ago, Frank. Think real hard.”

Travis looked at the door. Soon the guard would come in, and when he did Travis would go at Simon. Where was the guard? What was taking him so long? He must have heard the shot.

“You’re not the courier,” Frank said. “No code either, then.”

“No code, Frank. We made sure of that. This is about me and you.”

“I don’t know who you are.”

“Think, Frank. I know you remember because it made you who you are today. Fifteen years ago, before South Town was South Town. I was just a boy then, and now I’m here to kill you. But first I need you to know who I am.”

Frank’s expression changed, arrogance departed. The man holding the gun meant every word. The implications of Frank’s life were coming home now in an instant. He held his bleeding shoulder, grinding his teeth against the pain. “I’ve made a few mistakes in my life, I’ve done some bad things. It was a crazy time back then. I don’t know what I did to you, but I’m sorry. We can work this out.”

“Sorry is not good enough.”

The blood now covered Frank’s left side and his arm, dripping from his fingertips to the rug. Travis knew he was done. The man was going to finish the job. And then he thought: what if they only want Frank? What if they don’t plan to kill me at all?

“So tell me who you are,” Frank said.

The man lowered the gun so Frank could see his face. “Fifteen years ago you killed my brother, made me run to the city. He had a vision, and you killed him for it.”

Travis recognized him now. He looked just like his brother but bigger, more powerful. There wasn't that hopefulness about him either, the kind that followed his brother around and made his eyes like puffy clouds. But time in the city will do that to a person. Frank recognized him too, and looked at Travis before he responded, a summation of their relationship, the way things always stood. Jackal, his eyes said.

"Marciello Vargas. That was your brother. So you're Anton. I'm sorry I never recognized you, it's been a long time."

"Fifteen years." Anton brought the gun high again, ready to make good on his promise.

"And now you mean to kill me. That's fair, I appreciate that." He took his hand away from his shoulder very slowly, turned it upwards, pleading. "If I'm going to die, can I at least have a cigarette?"

"Go ahead," Anton said.

Frank took one from the desk. His hand came close to the gun but he left it there. His play would be a different sort. He lit the cigarette, inhaling deeply.

"I always respected your brother. He was a brilliant man, I truly believe that. It was so near to the fall and he had done so much in so little time. He took us in."

"I remember," Anton said.

"I offered a partnership, but he wouldn't take it. For as smart as he was he didn't recognize the truth, or maybe he did and he just didn't want to believe it. He didn't understand the evil that people are capable of. I tried to get him to see it my way, but we were of different views."

"So you came to our house, you killed him."

“That night he knew we were coming. He could have stopped us but he didn’t. He knew where we were sleeping, and he could’ve got us first. I gave him an out, and he never took it. He didn’t want to believe that I would go through with it after he’d helped us. Your brother told me once that all people are good if you show them good first. He didn’t believe in walls, protection, violence, any of it. He trusted people too much. He wasn’t ready for the reality of this place, of what it had become. And you know it, don’t you. Just look at this place now, look how we’re forced to defend ourselves. If your brother had joined me, we could’ve done great things together. But he didn’t. I think a man such as you would understand that. You went to the city. You’ve seen it. Do you think Marciello would have succeeded, given what you know now? Tough bugger you must have been. You look like Marciello, but you’re more like me.”

“Could be, but you’re still going to die today.”

“Your brother was not a killer, and that’s why he’s not alive today. How many people have you killed, Anton? Including Dan and Leo in the tunnel. How many others? You’re not like Marciello at all.”

“I’m what you made me.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Some men are born into things, and others use them as an act of justification. You’ve got a hatred in you that’s deeper than me, I can see it. So ask yourself, what will you do once you’ve killed me?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead, Frank. Are you ready?”

“Just wait a second. Before you do this, you need to know the truth. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Yes, I gave the order, but I never killed your brother.” He looked at Travis now, a cigarette in his hand like he always did, calm, controlling the room, controlling everything. “Did I, Travis?”

There was nothing Travis could say. Anton's eyes were full of vengeance, a lifetime of hatred. He looked so much like his brother, a ghost. Travis thought maybe it was Marciello come back from the dead, transformed into something that only a violent death could create because this Anton couldn't be real. He was like the faces outside the cathedral, the ones Father John promised would leave him. And his eyes, his eyes knew him to the core of his being, and that was the worst of it. He could see who Travis really was, right through all of it, to the truth and ugliness of it all. This Anton wasn't real, couldn't be. This was the spirit of Marciello, like the spirits old Jack the Indian talked about, fallen from the sky and wanting revenge. It was the only murder Travis regretted. He wanted to tell him but couldn't show his weakness, couldn't risk it. He thought about the long nights with Father John and hated him for it. It was all lies. There would be no redemption for a man like him. He was what he was and there was no undoing. Father John couldn't change his past, nobody could. This apparition was proof of that.

But Travis wasn't going to die sitting down. All the rage he felt, everything he felt since that night fifteen years ago he channeled it and he turned to Frank, because Frank was the genesis, Frank was his creator, and if he could just kill him he might be able to take back some of what he'd done.



## 50. On the Beach

Anton searched for a suitable visualization to guide him, but couldn't find one. Frank Baxter had killed his brother—this fact, which had directed the course of his life since he was a boy, defining his entire being, was false. He was robbed of his moment. Felt his life slipping away. Stay calm, he heard Marciello say, don't let it get to you. But the pressure was mounting in his chest, the heat behind his eyes like two wicks.

And there was Frank smoking at his desk, calm as ever. Even now, with half of him red and the blood still leaving, he was in control. Frank observed the change in Anton, a look of approval on his ashen face, and Anton knew Frank was right—he wasn't like his brother at all. Anton was something else entirely, a vessel for one thing only: violence. He told himself to be calm, to think clearly. But he wasn't thinking anymore. He was underwater now and felt the pressure in his eyes and ears like his head was going to burst; he couldn't breathe.

He looked at Travis Parker and recognized his badness, clear as the neon signs he remembered from the old days that lit up the highway at night on the long drive south, turning night into day, and knew he had to pay.

He turned to aim, but Travis was already out of the chair, already at the desk, going for Frank's throat with a thick-bladed hunting knife. Anton felt the trigger, the tightness of the spring, and nearly squeezed.

He didn't hear a thing, but felt it on his side like a sledgehammer. It spun him around so he was facing Frank. He saw the gun from Frank's desk in Frank's right hand. Couldn't be, Anton thought, Frank was left handed. Smoke from the barrel merged with cigarette smoke, and rose above Frank's smiling head. This was the Frank Anton remembered from his childhood, larger than life, arrogant. From the moment he'd arrived Anton knew he was trouble, but

Marciello wouldn't listen. Anton wished he could go back to that moment, convince his brother of what needed to be done, or do it himself. Then everything would be different. But Marciello never had that edge in him, the one that makes a killer a killer. Anton did, and Frank knew it, knew that Anton's hatred ran deep. It was there before Frank, as long as Anton could remember, the angry boy who nearly choked a kid to death in the playground. It was carved into his soul, it *was* him. Frank hadn't created him, he'd only let him loose upon the world. Anton would give anything to go back and make it right. He'd give his life for his brother's. But it was too late.

The blade entered Frank's neck, and whatever blood Frank had left shot across the oak desk. Frank heaved back in the chair, and then fell forward. His head hit the desk and he was dead, the bone-handled hunting knife sticking out of him at a forty-five degree angle.

This time Anton heard the shot, and knew it was Simon.

Travis stumbled toward the window. The bullet had gone through his back and exited his chest. He touched the wound uncomprehendingly, then reached up with red-stained hands like he was praying to a God who'd forsaken him. Simon fired again and Travis's arms flew open. Blood splattered the bullet-proof glass. He wavered before his knees gave out and then he fell, disappearing behind Frank's desk.

Anton felt the pain now. He looked where his hand was pressed to his side; there was so much blood, he couldn't stop it. Hard to breathe. He felt the fluid gurgling in his throat and knew the bullet was in his lungs. He coughed and frothy liquid dribbled down his chin. Couldn't get a good breath, felt like he was underwater. Simon was behind him now, trying to lift him up, saying something that Anton couldn't hear clearly, talking like he was above the surface, from the gunwale of a boat. The water between them was crystalline, gently lapping in rhythmic waves. They needed to get out of there, that's what Simon was saying. Yes, Anton thought, the

guards downstairs, they had to leave. He tried to stand but his strength was gone. Simon was in front of him now. C'mon, he said, we gotta go. Anton, let's go! Yes, Anton thought, we have to go. He felt the cold floor on the side of his face. He felt his warmth leaving. And then he felt nothing.

The beach was endless, arcing far into the sea like a planet's orbit. The sun was bright, the air clear, and the ocean was the most vivid kind of blue. In the distance, he saw his brother. Marciello was a boy again, the way he was during those early years at the beach, and Anton ran to catch him. He had marvellous speed, infinite energy. He ran full out in bare feet across the hot sand that glistened from the surf, and his breath did not waver. He knew that he could run like this forever.

Marciello turned and he was smiling. The sun shone on his skin tanned so dark that it was almost black, dark like the local children. The surf came up high in a white rush and they dodged it, laughing like it was a great game, not a care in the world. And the anger and hatred that he had carried inside was no longer there. But more than that—it had never existed. There was only this moment and it was everything. It was all that mattered, all that was right, and it was infinite. He saw his brother the way he did when he was a child, he saw everything this way. It was just them, the way it was before the fall and it was perfect, the most beautiful thing in the world.

## 51. Beyond North Town

The snow was deep and endless. They stopped on the crest of a hill to survey the valley below and could see about a hundred metres, enough to determine that there were no fresh tracks, two to three hours in this weather.

Four days out and the snow hadn't stopped. Simon wondered if it ever would. It had been a blessing, though, covering their tracks through the dangerous areas outside the city. They'd followed the river north, and where it turned east they continued north along secondary highways. Once off the river, they saw little evidence of habitation. Anton had been right, there weren't many people this way.

Simon took a compass and map from the front pocket of his jacket, and took a bearing. He laid the compass flat on the map and turned until he was facing what should be due north. "I'm still not sure about this declination," he said. "According to the topo map, this was magnetic north before the fall."

"And now it isn't?"

"No, it's off by at least 30 degrees." He turned until the compass needle pointed due north, northeast according to the map. "This is magnetic north."

"So what does it mean?"

"I don't know, except that I'll have to rely more on the map than on the compass." He looked at the valley, made out a crossing road and the roofs of two buildings sticking out of the snow. "You see the intersection down there, we turn right."

"The map tells you that?"

“No, that I remember. This used to be Indian land, a reserve. Whenever we came through in our old pickup my dad would fill up at the gas station there. He knew all the back roads. We go east, then we cut north on a gravel road after about five kilometers.”

“How far have we come?” Eva adjusted the straps on her pack and tucked her hair under her hat. She lifted each foot, and carefully shook the snow from the leather webbing of her snowshoes, her idea to bring along, two pairs she had stashed in the back of her closet; they might have perished without them.

“Half way. We’ve got five, maybe six days left in this weather. Good thing about the snowshoes.” He returned the compass and map to his pocket, and looked to the valley. “The snow has buried everything, the roads are thinning out from the alder and poplar that grow like weeds. Soon there will be just a small path, then nothing at all. Like our world never existed. Sometimes I think it’s crazy to believe the cabin will still be there when clearly nature does not want us here.”

“No,” Eva said. “It’s not crazy, it’s hope.”

“And if it’s gone?”

“Then we build another. It’s not that nature doesn’t want us here, she’s reminding us that she was here first and will always be here first. Nature rebuilds, that’s what she does. The thing is to live with her, not against her, like the branches of the tree, the stream in the forest. Once we begin to think like that she will be more our friend, and less our adversary.”

Eva looked to the valley, and he saw the little girl that had impossibly survived all alone after the fall. Her hope was infectious, and he thrived on it. And since they’d left, he’d come to realize that he needed her more than she needed him. The man he’d been in South Town, the life he’d lived before, it was her that had kept him going. She saw the world with wisdom that was

beyond her years, and she saw him. The things he kept from her she knew already. When he'd returned that night she'd recognized the change in him, but never said anything. He'd wanted to tell her how it felt to take a man's life, but he wasn't ready yet. There would be lots of time for that. He knew she would not judge him because his heart was good, and she knew this too.

"You sound like my parents," he said, and turned and headed into the valley, toward the buildings he remembered from his childhood, where his father would talk with the Indians, buying their cigarettes and shaking their hands. They'd tell him his license tags were expired and he'd laugh and tell them he didn't have insurance, and they'd show him the best roads to take north, the ones the cops left alone. His father always said the Indians still knew the country better than anybody.

His memories came back stronger now every day; it was tremendous what he could remember if he really tried. There was a lake near the cabin, and an aluminum canoe. When he was a kid he loved to fish, and he wondered if the lake still had fish in it, if the water from the flood had fully receded. He saw the cabin in winter, and in spring when the snow was melting. He saw it as it was when his family had first arrived, and after they'd made it a home. He saw his parents working the garden and living simply. He saw it with himself and with Eva. In the spring they'd plant the seeds from the greenhouse, build trap lines and make fishing nets, and in the fall they'd smoke the meat they'd killed and store the vegetables they'd harvested in the root cellar. She was looking at him in a way she never had before, honest and free and without anxiety. It was where she wanted to be and he too. It would be hard, but anything that matters is. He imagined the days ahead with excitement, the challenges they would face and overcome together. They would face nature with free and open hearts, the way life was meant to be lived.

### Epilogue – Funeral

The caskets were made of wood slabs scavenged from an old barn, weathered and warped, but nicely fashioned. There were good carpenters in this town. The procession was simple, but dignified. Four caskets carried on push-carts by priests, Frank's men, and ordinary people made their way from Frank's building, through the town, and to the cathedral.

It was the first proper funeral service anyone could remember, and the entire town was in attendance. Some people came to pay their respects to Anton Vargas, and to remember his brother Marciello. Some came to make sure that Frank Baxter was really dead, and with grim faces they watched his casket move past, surprised perhaps that they didn't feel anything more than relief, and a little bit stronger, fear. And others came to mourn the loss of their leader, the visionary who had made it all possible, the man to whom everyone in this town owed their lives.

Father John needed to be tactful. It was important to retain the support of the people, while gaining the trust of Frank's men. They were bad men, but he needed them. So Father John gave Frank an honourable service, put his casket beside Travis Parker's, Harry's, and Anton's to show that none was above the other, and had one service for all. He forgave them for their sins and asked God to welcome them into his house.

The snow was a nice touch, he thought.

The wood was piled high beneath the scaffold upon which the caskets were placed. The fire burned big and hot, reflecting off the peoples' faces. From the cathedral steps, he watched the flames extinguish what remained of Frank Baxter and the South Town of old. He watched the people—the families and the followers of Frank, a great division there, much distrust, but Father John was confident he could unite them. Word from the north was that Fisher was re-organizing, there was going to be a war. Nothing brought people together like a crisis, and Father John

would be ready. He was a man charged with an important mission. He was going to clean up this town, God-willing.

Father John turned from the scaffold and walked into the cathedral. He knelt and made the sign of the cross as he passed the chancel and entered the sacristy where a man was waiting for him on the little bench, reading the bible.

“Corinthians,” Father John said. “One of my favourite books.”

“Paul the Apostle,” the man said. “Brought Christianity to the new world.”

“But not before he spent years persecuting Christians.”

“I guess seeing is believing.”

“Any favourite passages?”

The man smiled. His black goatee and moustache were neatly trimmed, and his black hair was parted and combed behind his ears. “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.”

“Corinthians 4:20.”

“You know it by heart.”

“I have found this little book to be of more comfort in this day and age than anything else.”

“You know what I find comforting?” The man took a black forty-five from his jacket and laid it on the counter beside the little sink. “This right here. There’s something simplifying about a gun. It levels the playing field. All you need is a bit of luck, and a lot of guts. Frank understood that; I hope you do as well.”

Father John looked at the gun. He didn’t like seeing it inside his church, a sanctuary from the world outside. “Pity, that business with Frank. But I could sense the change coming for awhile now, and knew it was only a matter of time.”



“I trust you have all his men on side?”

“Most. They are followers, not leaders. The only leader among them is dead, and they need a shepherd.”

“Travis Parker. And the one that got away?”

“Gone, as far as I know. He left with a woman from your town, a woman named Eva. I doubt they will be a problem. But the hard drive. It’s too bad Frank had to go screw that up. But maybe he thought you would never have shared it with him.”

“I would have, in time. But the discovery was mine, and so the decision was mine. We had a good thing until Frank got all twitchy, looking under every rock, thinking I was going to kill him.”

“Were you?”

“Not at first, but then, well, you know how it was. Even Travis Parker was coming to you in the end, wasn’t he? When Frank stole the hard drive, I knew then what needed to be done. But somebody did it for me.”

“Your spies are well-informed.”

The man smiled. “That they are. That’s why I’m here. I’m hoping this incident will give us a chance for a fresh start. We need to have a mutual understanding. As Paul the Apostle wrote two thousand years ago, our kingdom resides in our power. And our power resides in our control over what the people believe to be true. Two towns, living peacefully side by side, an outskirts not half as dangerous as they believe, and what do you think will happen? People will get lazy, indifferent. Our control will disappear. We need those people to believe we are at war, and that we, you and I, will protect them from the bad men and from the outskirts. We need them to be afraid. Our survival depends on it.”

Father John nodded solemnly. “And what is the truth?”

“That we trade goods, and defend our towns and greenhouses from all outsiders. We divulge important information. We work together, but always on the surface we are at war, and the other town is an anathema.”

“It seems a bit extreme.”

“Maybe it seems that way to you now, but you’re new to this. It’s the only way.”

“I was hoping for a more peaceful approach. The people in this town are weary from years of Frank’s mistreatment. I promised them something better. They look to me for better.”

“So then give them better, earn their trust. Treat them the way you believe they should be treated.”

“I believe they are entitled to the truth.”

The man shrugged. “I believe you’re wrong. Remember, Father John, that the difference between a fake war and a real war is one of small degrees. We do it my way, the way we’ve always done it, or we do it the other way. But true peace is not an option. I think that this early in the game you should listen to the advice of someone more experienced. I want to see you succeed because it will benefit me. I want our partnership to be long and fruitful.”

Father John looked at the man sitting beside him, and knew that right now he held all the cards. Father John hadn’t yet won the support of all the men, hadn’t secured all the weapons and ammunition. His position was too precarious for him to try to topple the existing power structure. He would be crushed. In time, perhaps, but not yet. All along he’d heard whispers that Frank had made peace with Fisher, and that the war was symbiotic and false, but he’d never known for certain. Now that he knew, he wanted to reveal this truth to his people. But he couldn’t, because he needed Fisher, and because he saw the sense in what Fisher was saying. If there were no war,

nothing to fear, those men that followed Frank would never follow him. They would leave or raid the greenhouses, get drunk and carry on until they self-destructed and brought down the town with them. Fear was their motivation; it was the greatest tool he had. Solidify your position, he told himself, and bide your time. Father John smiled. "I want the same thing, Fisher."

Fisher reached out and shook Father John's hand. "I knew you'd be reasonable."

"So what comes next?" Father John asked.

"A crisis. Nothing major, enough to keep the people alert. A few skirmishes, a couple dead. I'll send some men to raid, you'll shut them down, show your people that you mean business, that you are fit to lead."

"And what do you want in return?"

"Tobacco. We're nearly out, and my men are getting ancy. Nothing satiates a violent man like a good smoke. Ammunition, too. Harry had all the primers and powder; he traded with us but now he's dead. His stash is bound to be hidden somewhere in his cathedral room." He looked at the bottles of cider that lined the shelf above sink. "I'll send you some more of that cider, since you seem to like it so much."

Father John took a bottle from the shelf and poured two glasses of an amber coloured liquid that smelled strong and sweet. "Now we drink to our partnership."

"Whiskey?" asked Fisher.

"Scotch. A good grade, no doubt. I found it in Frank's office after the ordeal. Some of the things he had in there, remarkable."

"He liked fine things."

"He did, and his spoils will be divided among the people. My men will be removing the generator today. I'm sure I can find a more community-based use for that machine."

Fisher smiled warmly. "You're a good man, Father John. Here's to you." He drank his scotch and Father John poured him another. And while they drank Father John observed this man, who was now his partner, and wondered how he could so easily send men to their deaths as though it were a matter of course. But soon they were discussing the bible, favourite passages and verses, and his trepidation faded. Father John was impressed at Fisher's knowledge, and admired his point of view. They poured more whiskey and the talk became more animated, and before long they were like old friends, expostulating about great empires and the flood, the threads of good and evil that wound their way to the centre of men's souls, and that always in the end no matter what a man says he believes, it is the hunger that rules above all else.