

CHAPTER ONE

Johnny woke in the crook of a tree under a diamond-studded sky. The hammock around him was worn nylon, and the great oak a hundred feet tall. Even at sixty feet, its trunk was thicker than Johnny, its branches bent but strong. Johnny knew every one of those branches by feel: the worn spots from his feet and hands, the way they leaned out from the trunk and split like fingers. He could climb the tree in total blackness, find his way past the hammock to smaller branches that bent beneath his weight. From there he could see the moon and the forest, the swamp that rolled off to the south. This was his place—six thousand acres—and he knew every stream and hill, every dark pool and secret glade.

He didn't always sleep in the tree. There was a cabin, but it felt heavy at times. He'd built it himself, so it wasn't the shape or size of it that pushed him, like a wind, to the ancient tree on its splintered hill. It wasn't the dreams or memories or any dark thing others might suspect. Johnny came for the views, and for the way they connected him to the land he owned. The tree grew from a knob of stone and soil that rose from the swamp to join a span of similar hills that cut a line between the wetlands and the thin-soiled higher ground that notched into the far, north corner of Raven County. From the hammock's crook he could see beyond the swamp and across the river. Climb another thirty feet, and he could see a glint of light that was the tallest building in town. That was eighteen miles in a straight line, thirty-seven if you had to drive. Roads this far north were twisted and crumbled, and that was fine with Johnny. He

—-1
—0
—+1

didn't care for people on his land, and had fired once on hunters too antagonistic to leave when asked politely. He didn't plan to hit them—they'd be dead if he had—but black bear had a special place in Johnny's heart, and two mothers had been killed with cubs still in the den. Because of that, he marked the borders and tracked hunters, in particular, with sleepless determination. Police, of course, didn't see it his way, and neither did the courts. After the shooting, there'd been a few months in jail and a firestorm of media. That was because reporters never forgot, and to most he was still the same dark-eyed child they'd made famous ten years earlier.

But Johnny didn't care if people thought him dangerous or strange. It hurt to see the worry on his parents' faces, of course. They wanted him in the city and between four walls, but deep down they understood how life had lifted him from the dark pages of his youth and brought him to this special place. And it *was* special. He could taste it on the breeze, see it in a sky so heavy with stars, it made his eyes water to look up and marvel at the relentless depth of it. Beneath all that pure, white light was a purple forest that moved with a rhythm as familiar, now, as the beat of Johnny's heart.

This place.

His life.

Leaving the hammock, he let his hands and feet find their way to the smallest branches that would still take his weight. The trunk was thin so high, the horizon a purple line darker than the rest. He studied the canopy, then moved up the tree until the trunk was small enough to cup with both hands, and then with only one. It was dangerous to climb so high, but Johnny had a reason.

He was looking for fire.

There'd been fires in the wood before: campfires and lightning strikes; a burn, once, from a hunter's dropped cigarette. Fires like this were different because Johnny, the next day, couldn't find a trace of them, not a charred twig or a burnt blade.

And he'd looked hard.

The first time it happened was just like this: a cloudless sky and a

whisker of smoke. He'd gone higher for a better look and seen a glimmer halfway up a distant hill that was two down in the line of peaks that ran north and west. Three sides of that hill sloped gently beneath a layer of pine and scrub; the side facing Johnny was a slab of weathered stone. Near its base, boulders littered an area the size of a city block, and from that ruin the rest of it rose: sheer walls and slopes of scree, then more piled stone and knuckles of trees before the final wall of broken granite pushed free. That's where the fires were, somewhere on that weather-beaten face.

In three years he'd seen the fire eleven different times. This was the twelfth, and Johnny took his time watching it. Paths ran between the boulders and up the shattered face, but the paths crossed and doubled back and petered out. It was easy to get turned around, so he gauged angles and approaches. He pictured the route he would take, and when he left the tree, he did it quick and sure, dropping the last eight feet and rising at the run. He was barefoot in cutoff jeans and no shirt, but his soles were hard as leather and his eyes sharp from years in dark woods. And this night wasn't close to dark. Stars speckled the sky, and from beyond the river a half-moon rose. Even then, most would find it hard to move at such speed, but when Johnny ran, it was for real.

And he was running hard.

A footpath took him to the river, and when the water spread, he followed a ridge that carried him to the second hill and up it in a hard, fast climb. At the top he paused, looking for smoke. The wind was right, and for a moment he thought he was too late, that the fire was dead and whoever built it, gone. It had happened before—a sudden void of scent—and when it did happen, he wanted to throw caution to the wind and run blind, if that's what it took. The fire was a riddle, its builder a ghost. But life in the forest taught lessons beyond readiness and speed. Patience had its place, as did stealth and simple faith, and Johnny trusted his senses.

The fire builder was no ghost.

The smoke came again in the final valley, a downdraft that tasted of wood ash and charred resin. Creeping to the edge of the trees, Johnny studied the open ground and boulders tumbled like flung houses against the root of the hill. Paths ran between them, and in places they touched

—1

—0

—+1

to form cathedral vaults. Beyond the boulders, the trails were narrow and twisted, and Johnny let his eyes move up and down the dark lines they cut through trees and scree and along the foot of the lower face. Other trails showed higher up, but they were faint in the moonlight, and not so much paths as ledges. Johnny looked for fire on the face, but couldn't find it.

Halfway up, he thought, nearer the east side than the west.

Problem was, the fire seemed to move. Last month it was higher up and farther west; the one before that, dead center above a rockslide shaped like an inverted V.

Crossing a final stretch of broken ground, Johnny took the main draw through the boulders. Side trails split off three times before stone met above his head, and the path narrowed. When it got tight, Johnny angled his shoulders and trailed fingers over the walls, feeling a vellum of fur and fine hairs left over the years by bear, coyote and deer. Once around a final bend, the stone rose up to form a secret place that might have been there, unchanged, since the dawn of man. Johnny peered up a narrow chimney and saw a slash of pale stars. After that, he followed the right-hand trail, twisting up the slope as boulders dropped away. He was on a ridgeline beneath a final belt of woods. Still no sign of fire.

"All right, then."

He worked through the trees to a slope of scree at the base of the cliff. Rock shifted as he climbed, and twice he fell. After ten minutes he peered down, dizzy from a sense of sudden *wrongness*. There was too much space beneath him, too much purple stone and empty air. Looking again, he saw a notch in the tree line that should be beneath him, but had somehow shifted left. It felt as if he'd gone blank and climbed a hundred yards without knowing it. Leaning out, he tried to determine exactly where he was. Higher than he should be, and farther right.

No problem, he thought.

But that was not true. The slope was too steep, the scree as slippery as scales piled one atop the other. A hundred feet up was a stand of scrub oaks and pine. Beyond that, a footpath followed the base of the lower cliff and led to a series of ledges that twisted upward to the final cliff beyond. Johnny was too high and too far right, pinned on a section of

slope he avoided exactly because it was so dangerous. He told himself it was a simple mistake, that he'd rushed the climb, that things looked different in the false light of 4 A.M. He said it twice, but didn't believe it. He'd been up the face seven times with no problem.

Now this.

Moving with care, Johnny tried to work his way off the pitch. He looked for the largest stones, the most stable holds. Twelve feet across, his foot slipped, and twenty feet of stone disappeared beneath him. Johnny felt it go, then was gone, too, the sound like a freight train as he saw the fall in his mind: hundreds of feet, near vertical, then trees and boulders, an avalanche of scree heavy enough to bury him alive.

But Johnny didn't die.

Fifty feet down, he slammed to a stop, bruised and bloodied and half buried. It took time to think through the hurt and figure out if the chance yet remained to die. The hill above was swept clean. Around him, loose stone mounded against a two-foot lip of solid rock, beneath which was a drop long and steep enough to kill most any man alive. Johnny looked left and right, and that's how close it was—a foot or so, or maybe inches.

Dawn was a blush in the trees by the time Johnny limped to the small, square cabin and let himself inside. His bed took up space near the stone fireplace, and he fell into it, hurting. When he woke, it was three hours later. After dropping his clothes in a corner, he went to the creek to wash off dust and blood. He bandaged the worst of the cuts, then pulled on jeans, boots and a shirt. At the door, he checked his face in a four-inch mirror. The eyes that stared back were as still as glass, and so unflinching that few people looked into them for very long. At twenty-three, Johnny didn't smile without reason or waste time on people he found insincere. How often could he hear the same questions?

How are you, son?

Are you holding up okay?

For ten years he'd endured one version or another of the same pointless phrase, knowing, as he did, that people sought the darker currents that ran beneath.

What did you see in those terrible places?

—1
—0
—+1

How fucked up are you, really?

Those were the people who risked the darkness of Johnny's eyes, those who asked the questions and looked deep, hoping for a glimpse of the boy he'd been, the glimmer of wildness and war paint and fire.

Thirty minutes later, Johnny left the cabin, pushing south into the swamp, and from there across tendons of dry ground until he reached the ruins of a settlement once owned by freed slaves and their descendants. Most of the structures were rotted and fallen, but a few buildings still stood. When people asked about Hush Arbor, this was the place they meant: the cemetery, the old houses, the hanging tree. Few understood how large it really was.

Unlocking one of the sheds, Johnny backed out a truck that was white and dented and a half century old. From there, it was two miles to a metal gate. Once through it, he merged onto a state road and turned up the radio, scrolling past gospel and talk radio and local sports. Near the bottom of the dial he found the classical station out of Davidson College, and listened to that as hills spread out and the city rose. Johnny knew every street corner and neighborhood, every monument and cobbled drive and twist of asphalt. In three hundred years, Raven County had seen its share of loss and conflict. Sons had gone to war, and died. There'd been riots, depression; parts of the city had burned.

Johnny drove past the courthouse and stopped at a light, watching how people held hands and laughed and admired their reflections in the burnished glass. A block later he angled to the curb where the old hardware store touched the sidewalk and women gathered to look at potted plants and tomatoes and wooden trays stacked with beans and corn and peaches. Nobody noticed Johnny until he stepped from the truck; and when it started, it started small. A young woman blinked, and another one noticed. By the time Johnny edged past, four of them were staring. Maybe it was the way he looked, or his history with the town. Whatever the case, Johnny kept to himself as he pushed through the door and made eye contact with the old man behind the glass-topped counter at the rear of the store.

-1—

0—

+1—

"Johnny Merrimon. Good morning to you."

"Daniel. Morning."

"Sorry about the welcoming committee." Daniel dipped his head at the front window. "But two of them are pretty enough, and about your age. Maybe you shouldn't rush past so quick and determined."

Johnny nodded, but didn't respond. It wasn't that he didn't like a pretty girl—he did—but Johnny would never leave Hush Arbor, and few women were interested in life without power or phone or running water. Daniel didn't seem to know or care. He waved at the ladies beyond the glass, then put his eighty-watt smile back on Johnny. "So, young Mr. Merrimon. What can I do for you this fine day?"

"Just the ammunition."

"Got a new four-wheeler out back. I can offer a good deal."

"All I need are the cartridges."

"Fair enough. I like a man who knows his own mind." The old man unlocked the counter and removed a twenty-count box of .270 Winchester. "Twelve gauge, too?"

"Same as always."

"Bird shot, then. Number seven."

Daniel put two boxes on the glass, and a tuft of white hair rose at the crown of his head. "What else?"

"That'll do it."

Johnny paid the exact amount from long habit, and had both boxes in his hand before Daniel spoke again. "Your mother asks about you, you know." Johnny stopped, half turned. "She knows you come here, and that it's a monthly thing. Now, I know it's not my business—"

"It's not."

Daniel held up both hands, his head moving side to side. "I know that, son, and I'm not the kind to interfere—I hope you can accept that about me—but she comes here asking about you, and damn it . . ." The old man broke off, struggling. "You should really call your mother."

"Did she ask you to tell me that?"

"No, she didn't. But I've known you since you were six, and you've never been the selfish kind of boy."

—1

—0

—+1

Johnny put the boxes down. He didn't mean to sound angry, but did. "We have a good thing here, Daniel. Don't you think?"

"Yes, but—"

"Most of what I spend in town I spend in your store. It's not much, I know, just cartridges and salt, fishing gear and tools. I come here because you're local and you're nice, and because I enjoy it. I really do. We smile and talk rifles. You ask what I do up in all that wilderness, and I give you the best answers I can. A joke between us is not a rare thing, either."

"Johnny, listen—"

"I don't come here for advice about girls or my mother." It was the hardest voice, the darkest eyes. It wasn't fair to unload on Daniel, but Johnny lacked the will to walk it back. "Look, I'll see you next month, okay?"

"Sure, Johnny." The old man nodded, but kept his eyes down and his mouth bent. "Next month."

Johnny pushed his way from the store, not looking at the women still gathered on the sidewalk. He settled into the truck, closed his eyes and wrapped his fingers around the wheel.

Shit.

He was forgetting; he could feel it. Forgetting how to relate, to be a part of . . . this.

Johnny opened his eyes and looked at the old man and his store, at the stretch of sidewalk and traffic, the pretty girls who still looked his way and giggled and whispered and stared. One of them was Daniel's granddaughter, who was twenty-two and pretty as a picture. The old man had tried to set them up once, six months ago.

Johnny had forgotten that, too.

So Johnny made a choice, and it wasn't an easy one. In spite of what the shopkeeper said, selfishness had nothing to do with Johnny's long absences from his mother's side. When she looked at her son's face, she saw the daughter, killed young, and the husband who'd died trying to save her. Johnny knew that truth because he faced it every time he chose to confront a mirror.

This is how my father stood.

This is how my sister would appear.

That all made sense, but Johnny was forgetting, too—not just how to live a normal life, but also the sound of Alyssa’s voice, the secret looks only a twin could understand. The past walked beside him as a shadow might, and every day that shadow stretched and thinned, the memories of childhood and family and how good it all had been. Johnny feared that when enough days had passed, the shadow would fade and pale until it was simply gone. Johnny dreaded that day more than anything else, so in the end, he did what the old man said.

He went to see his mother.

Catherine Hunt lived with her second husband in a small house behind a picket fence. Two blocks from the library and the original courthouse, it filled a shaded lot on the corner of Jackson Street and Bank. It had a good porch, good neighbors. Pulling to the curb, Johnny studied the bright windows, the gleaming paint.

“Are you staking out the place?”

Johnny’s stepfather came around a box bush the size of a small car. He wore blue jeans and leather gloves, was dragging a tarp full of lawn clippings.

“Aren’t you supposed to be out catching bad guys?”

“No bad guys today.” Clyde Hunt dropped the tarp and opened a gate in the fence. He was in his fifties and fit, and wore his hair short. Clyde leaned on the passenger door, then dropped an eyelid and pushed a hand through the open window. “How are you, son? It’s been too long.” The big detective leaned closer, squinting. “Goddamn, Johnny. What happened to you?”

“It was nothing. Just. You know . . .”

Johnny retrieved the hand, but couldn’t stop his stepfather from looking more closely with those cop eyes of his. He saw the abrasions and the scratches, the way Johnny sat with one shoulder rolled inward.

“Step out of the truck, Johnny.”

“I just came to see Mom—”

“Your mother’s not here. Come on, now, son. Step out of the vehicle.”

Johnny thought about it, then switched off the engine and stepped

—1
—0
—+1

from the truck. Clyde peeled off leather gloves and watched him onto the sidewalk.

“You look a little busted up. What happened?”

“Nothin’.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Is it the ribs?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Don’t bullshit me, son. I saw the way you were sitting, the way you walk. You don’t think I’ve had cracked ribs before? Come on, now. Let me see.” Johnny looked the length of the street, then lifted the shirt on one side. Clyde whistled low. “Goddamn, son. That’s a hell of a lot of damage. Was it a fight?”

“A fall.”

Clyde studied Johnny’s face, and the doubt was hard to hide. There’d been fights before: trespassers, the two hunters, the four months in jail. Johnny was stubborn, and rarely backed down. It caused problems. “Come inside, I’ll patch you up.”

Johnny lowered his shirt. “That’s not necessary.”

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

Accustomed to obeyed orders, the big cop turned without looking back. Johnny watched him for three steps, then trailed him up the gravel walk and onto the shaded porch. Inside, they followed a broad hall to the master bath.

“Take off the shirt. Sit.” Clyde pointed at a stool in front of a sink and mirror. Johnny shrugged off the shirt and kept his eyes down as his stepfather rustled in a cabinet for hydrogen peroxide, ointment and adhesive bandages. When he straightened, he stood for long seconds, watching Johnny stare at the floor, the wall, his hands. “Your mother does the same thing sometimes. Not as much as she used to, but it still happens.”

“What are you talking about?”

Clyde sat, and his voice was softer. “The way she gathers herself before facing the mirror. It’s just in the mornings, really, and just for a second or two.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?”

Johnny faced the mirror and in his reflection saw the face of a dead twin. "Next week it will be ten years since we found her."

"Thursday, I know."

"Do you ever talk about it?"

"With your mother? Sometimes. Not like we used to."

Johnny looked away from the mirror. "Where is she?" he finally asked.

"Your mother's at the coast with some lady friends, and it's a good thing, too. She'd have a heart attack if she saw your back like this."

"It's bad?"

"You haven't looked?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Go on, then."

Johnny twisted on the stool, saw bruises and dried blood and ripped skin.

"You've bled through the shirt," Clyde told him. "I'll give you another one."

"Thank you."

"This next part's going to hurt." He palpated the ribs, the spine. "Just hold still." Johnny did, but it was hard. "All right. I don't think any ribs are broken. Cracked, maybe. Definitely bruised."

"Are we finished?"

"Not yet." The cleanup took another ten minutes. When it was done, Clyde pulled a shirt from the closet and tossed it to Johnny. "You could probably use a few stitches, but the butterfly bandages should do the job if you take it easy for a few days. No pulling, all right? Don't chop any wood or climb that damn tree." Johnny shrugged into the shirt. Clyde leaned against the wall. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It was just a fall. A careless mistake."

"I've seen you make mistakes. None of them have ever been careless."

"This one was. Just stupid, really."

"What about life in general? You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"How about money?"

—1

—0

—+1

“The money’s fine, too.”

“How is that possible, Johnny? You don’t work. You don’t have plans to work.”

“Dad’s life insurance—”

“Your father’s life insurance, right. Let’s talk about that. You got a hundred thousand from the insurance company when you were thirteen. By the time you turned eighteen, it grew to what, about one-twenty? How much have you spent on lawyers? All of it?”

“I’m fine, Clyde. Really.”

“We’re here for you, son. Let us help you.”

“I said I don’t need money.”

“Only because you live on berries and roots and snakes . . .”

“It’s not like that, and you know it.”

“Okay, you have a garden. That’s nice. What if you couldn’t hunt or plant? What if you’d cracked your spine instead of a few ribs? What if that great swamp just swallowed you whole?”

“It didn’t. It won’t.”

“You can’t live like this forever.”

“Says who?” Johnny stood. “Listen, I appreciate the bandages and all, but I have to go.”

Johnny pushed into the hall, but Clyde caught him before he got to the front door. “Come on Johnny. Wait, wait, wait.” Johnny did, just a second. But it was enough for Clyde to turn him, wrap him gently. “We just love you, son. We miss you and we worry.” He stepped back, but kept his hands on Johnny’s shoulders. “There’s no judgment here. Look at me, all right.” Johnny did, and felt the anger ebb. “Anything you need: if you want to come home, if you need money.”

“Listen, Clyde—”

“You want to go, I know. I can see that, too. It’s always Hush Arbor, always the land. Just tell me one thing before you leave. Help me understand.”

“What?”

“Why do you love it so much?”

He meant the silence and the swamp, the lonely hills and endless trees. On the surface it was a simple question, but Johnny’s past had

branded him in a way few could ignore: the things he'd believed and leaned upon, the way he'd searched so long for his sister. If Johnny spoke now, of magic, they'd think him confused or insane or trapped, somehow, in the delusions of a difficult past. Without living it, no one could grasp the truth of Hush Arbor.

Johnny wouldn't want them to if they could.

CHAPTER TWO

The lawyer's office occupied the top three floors of a nine-story building downtown. The building itself was the second tallest in Raven County, and from the top-floor lobby Johnny could see the courthouse and jail, the banks and people and redbrick sidewalks. Bright metal winked on the street, and Johnny felt heat through the glass as he stepped closer and looked into the distance where houses showed beneath a canopy of trees.

"Excuse me, sir? May I help you?"

The receptionist was as polished as the marble floor. Her smile seemed real enough, but it was clear she was unused to clients in faded jeans and scuffed boots. "I'm here to see Jack Cross."

"I'm sorry. Who?"

"Jack Cross. He's one of your attorneys."

"I don't think so."

"He started this week."

"Sir, I would know—"

"Fifth from the top, thirty-third from the bottom." Johnny dipped his head toward the directory on the far wall. "Thirty-seven lawyers. My friend is your newest."

The woman glanced left, and for a moment her head tilted. "I'm sorry. Have you been here before?"

"First time."

"How did you . . . ?" She pointed at the list of lawyers and lifted an eyebrow to finish the question.

"How did I see my friend's name?"

"And count the number of attorneys in this firm?"

"I have very good eyes."

"Apparently."

"He's on the seventh floor. May I go down?"

"Give me a minute to sort this out. Would you like anything while you wait?"

"I'm fine."

"Just a moment, then."

Johnny watched her walk away, noted the fitted skirt and expensive shoes. He noticed subtler things, too. Beneath the perfume, she smelled of coffee and toner and men's aftershave. A single nail was bitten to the quick. A few moments later she was back. "I'm sorry for the confusion," she said. "We do have a Jack Cross who joined the firm this week. I'm not sure how I missed his arrival, but I did. He's in our bankruptcy division. Seventh floor, as you said."

"May I go down?"

"He's in court with one of our partners. May I take a message?"

Johnny blinked, unsure why his best friend's presence in court was so unexpected. He was a lawyer, after all. It's why Johnny had come. "I'd like to leave a note."

"I'm happy to deliver it."

"May I leave it on his desk? He's an old friend, and it's personal."

"Of course." The receptionist pressed fingers against the skin beneath her neck, and left fine, pale ovals when she lifted them. "Seventh floor. Ask for Sandy. She handles clerical for the new associates."

Johnny took the stairs down, and found Sandy, who was everything the receptionist was not. Frenetic. Mussed. Charmless. "Mr. Cross is not here."

"Yes, you've said as much."

Johnny followed her from one hall to the next, stopping each time she pushed into a cubicle or office to dole out files and hard advice.

—1

—0

—+1

You signed in the wrong place!

This is for Judge Ford, not Judge Randolph. Pay attention!

After the fourth office, she rounded on Johnny, smoothing gray hair behind an ear. "I'm sorry. What's your name again?"

"Merrimon. Johnny."

A moment's confusion clouded her features. She'd heard the name, but couldn't place it. "Are you a friend? Family?"

"I'm a client."

"Mr. Cross doesn't have clients yet."

"Then, I'll be his first."

She remained unconvinced. Around her, keyboards rattled and clicked. Other assistants pushed other papers. No one looked up twice. "I'm more than able to deliver a message."

"I'd prefer to do it myself."

"Is there a problem of some sort?"

"Not at all. I'd like to see his office if I may, and I'd like the note to be front and center when he returns from court."

"And your name is Johnny Merrimon?"

The name still tickled something deep. Johnny saw it in the eyes, the pursed lips.

"Why does that sound familiar?"

"I have no idea."

She worked the angles, concerned that, despite appearances, the scruffy young man taking up her time might just be important, somehow. It took three seconds. When the decision broke, it went Johnny's way. "I can't leave you alone in an attorney's office."

The office was better than Johnny expected. Double windows looked down on the courthouse and the park beside it. Framed diplomas hung on the wall. The furniture was expensive and new.

"This is it. There's paper on the desk."

Johnny took his time because no one had expected much from the small, lost boy with the bad left arm. Jack had seen a girl die, and lied about the whys of it. He'd served time in juvenile incarceration, and spent more time than most in the shadow of Johnny Merrimon. But Jack didn't

end up where people thought he would. He wasn't in prison or working at a car wash, wasn't a drunk or strung out or ruined in some other way. Johnny thought that deserved a moment's appreciation, so he ran a finger along rowed books, then lifted a photograph from the desk. It was the only one in the office: two boys at the river—Johnny and Jack, like brothers.

"Anytime now would be fine."

The gray-haired woman was frustrated and tense, but Johnny kept his eyes on the picture of the boys. They were shirtless and grinning, both of them burned as brown as dirt. Behind them the river looked as motionless as stone, and beyond that was only shadow. It seemed as if the sun shone on the boys alone, and in some ways it had. There were no secrets between friends that age, and the differences were small: X-Men or Avengers, stickball or bat. Johnny could blink and taste his first beer, drunk warm on a flat rock in the center of the same river. Jack had stolen it from his father, and wanted to share it with Johnny. *Boys to men*, he'd said. *First beer* . . .

"Sir, I really must insist."

Johnny gave it another second, then put the photo down. Squaring a legal pad in the center of the desk, he wrote his note in broad strokes. When he straightened, the woman read it without hesitation or shame.

I'm proud of you, Jack. You did it.

Now do the right thing or I break that pussy arm for real.

She read it twice, and a flush built in her neck. "Mr. Cross cannot help his deformity."

"I'm aware of that."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

Johnny offered the first real smile since he'd left the lobby upstairs. "Just make sure he sees it."

An hour later the city was a glint in the rearview mirror. A bag rode the seat beside Johnny, and in it were the other things he needed from town: shampoo and cigars, hard cheese and brown liquor. Johnny pictured

—1

—0

—+1

what was coming, and the smile stayed with him as he rolled through the trees and beside black water. In the clearing, he drove past a burnt shack and the old kitchen, standing alone. After parking in the same shed, Johnny left the truck and turned for the web of trails that would carry him through the swamp and into the hills on the other side. The route took him beside the cemetery and past forty-five markers, most of them ancient. Beneath an oak tree that was massive and gnarled, the oldest of the stones were small and unmarked. Johnny dreamed of them more often than he liked.

Hanged slaves under a hanging tree . . .

That was county history, and dark.

It was family history, too.

The walk to the cabin took thirty minutes, but for anyone else would be longer. A wrong step, and the mud would suck off your shoes. Another moment's inattention, and you might not get out alive. Water moccasin. Copperhead. It was part of the reason he'd chosen to build the cabin where he had. No road led in from the north, east or west. Beyond his property line was another forty thousand undeveloped acres, most of it state forest or game lands. It was possible to hike in—there were trails—but the old slave settlement was the closest you could get by car. To go from there to high ground meant crossing the swamp, and few had the stomach for it. It wasn't just the snakes and mud. Trails turned around and faded and died. It was easy to get lost.

Not that it was all mud and black water. Land rose up in places to support hardwoods, never timbered. Five acres or thirty, the islands broke from the swamp like the back of some great creature, half-submerged. Between them, the trail grew spongy and slick and, in some places, was no more than a succession of hummocks. The cabin itself rode a finger of land jutting in from the hills to the north. A fifty-foot rock face backstopped the glade, the face of it like a bronze shield as sunlight stained the cabin yellow. It was a beautiful place, and Johnny kept its secret close. His parents had been twice, but didn't care for the wild lands in the north of the county. Only one other person had ever seen the cabin. He'd helped Johnny pick the spot, helped him build it.

-1—

0—

+1—

Johnny glanced at the sun, then checked his watch.

He laughed aloud, thinking of Jack in the middle of all that swamp.

“Motherfuckin’ . . . fuck.”

Jack went down in the mud for the third time. It’s not that he didn’t know the trail—he did—it’s just that he wasn’t Tarzan or Doc Savage or any other purely fictional character who chose to live in the ass end of a jungle.

“Johnny . . .”

His feet went out again.

“Damn it . . .”

Breathing heavily, Jack dragged himself up and moved with care. He was still in his suit, the pants tucked into tall boots. The tie was off, but the jacket carried the same mud stains as the seat of his pants. He cursed again, wondering why mosquitoes loved him so much, yet found Johnny Merrimon somehow distasteful.

“You like this, don’t you?” He was muttering now, switchgrass sawing at his hands as he pulled himself through the mud. “Probably watching me right now. Sitting in some tree . . .”

A foot broke loose with a sucking noise, and Jack worked along the trail, staying where the grass was tall and tufted. He’d known Johnny since they were seven, and even now, after so many years, struggled with the idea that his best friend owned all this.

Don’t know why he’d want to . . .

Just mud and bugs and . . .

Jack crested the last hump of dry ground before water stretched away and the sun sank low enough to paint it all with perfect color: the orange water and distant hills, the trees and green earth and sun-kissed granite. In that light he saw Hush Arbor as his friend did, as he’d seen it himself when they first crossed the swamp. They’d been fourteen at the time, a couple of kids with no business so deep in the wild. But they’d come nonetheless; they’d stood in the same place and seen the same view.

“Jesus Christ.” Jack palmed sweat from his eyes, still breathing hard.
“How could I ever forget?”

—-1

—0

—+1

By 6:40, Johnny had everything ready. A camp table and chairs stood on hard-packed dirt at the edge of the glade. Bourbon was on the table. Enamel plates held cheese and smoked venison; a nine-pound catfish was ready for the spit. The cigars were more than he could afford, but they didn't screw around with cigars, he and Jack. That was a promise they'd made a long time ago.

Cheap booze, cheap cigars . . .

They'd go hungry first.

It was a silly promise, a boy's boast; but they'd lived by it since high school, and Johnny would not be the one to break the streak.

Stretching out his legs, Johnny laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes, smiling. The air was warm; a light breeze moved.

In the swamp, Jack went down again.

The trail firmed at last, and Jack slowed as open water fell away and sycamores and cypress leaned out, close enough to touch. He wanted this part to go right, so he moved quietly through the twig rush and scrub.

Just this once . . .

He ghosted onto dry land, the cabin a wink through the trees. Johnny sat at a table beyond the ferns, barefoot in faded jeans with both eyes closed and his face tilted to the sun. His hair was longer than the last time, and for an instant Jack felt the old jealousy. Johnny was angular and strong, and had the kind of face that even men looked at twice. He wasn't movie-star handsome, but *striking* was too small a word. With the tan and dark eyes, he looked like a hero from old stories, the kind who fought with swords and got the girls.

Jack's gaze fell briefly to his own misshapen arm. Hanging from his left shoulder, it looked like the castoff from a ten-year-old boy. The suit sleeve swallowed it; even the fingers were too small. It's how people had known him, growing up. *Oh yeah, the kid with the fucked-up arm.* Only Johnny understood that talking about it made it a nonissue, that joking was even better.

And Johnny was close now, legs stretched out, eyes still closed. Jack

stopped under the last tree and bounced a pebble on his palm. The throw had to be just right—not in the face and no blood, but hard enough to sting like a mother. That’s how it had been since they were kids.

Who was quietest?

Who had the better arm?

He smoothed a thumb across the stone, and Johnny spoke as the good arm went back.

“Don’t do it.”

“Goddamn it, Johnny.” Jack lowered his arm, not surprised but genuinely bothered. “How do you do that? You do it every time. It’s not right.”

Johnny opened a single eye. “You make a lot of noise.”

“Does raising my arm make a lot of noise?”

Johnny got to his feet and lifted the bottle of bourbon. “Don’t worry about it. Come on. Have a drink. You look like you could use it.”

Jack stepped from the shadows, still troubled by the unnatural way Johnny seemed to always know. The sound of footsteps, sure. Cracked twigs and sucking mud. Jack could see that. How did Johnny know the very second he was about to throw?

Every time, Jack thought, but could be more specific than that.

Seventeen times in the last three years.

Before that, Jack could catch him unaware at least half the time; and that had been the pattern since childhood. Sometimes Johnny saw it coming. Sometimes he didn’t.

So what was different now?

Stepping into the clearing, Jack took in the table and the food and his friend’s sharp grin. The eyes were intense but bright, his hair wavy and unkempt and long enough to brush the collar of his shirt.

“Jack Cross, Attorney-at-Law.” Johnny moved into the ferns, gave Jack a hard squeeze. “Goddamn, I’m proud of you.”

Jack returned the pressure, then stepped back, embarrassed. Johnny rarely showed affection, and its expression touched Jack’s heart in complicated ways. “Thanks, Johnny. It’s been a long road.”

That was a bitter truth, and both of them knew it. Jack had clawed from a ruined childhood in the space of six months, and Johnny was one

—1

—0

—+1

of the few who understood the engine that drove such rapid, irreversible change. Guilt. Regret. Juvenile incarceration.

“Welcome,” he said. “Sit, sit.”

Johnny gestured at the table, and Jack took a chair as Johnny poured bourbon and passed a glass.

“Bright lights and better days. I’m glad you came.”

Jack touched Johnny’s glass with his own. “Did I have a choice?”

“Always,” Johnny said; but there really was no choice. Twice a month they met for dinner, once at Jack’s and then here. That was the pattern, and neither of them broke it. “Why the suit?” Johnny asked.

“Huh?”

Johnny sat across the table. He swirled bourbon in the glass and pointed with a finger. “Why didn’t you change clothes?”

“Court ran late. I didn’t have time to go home, and wasn’t about to be caught in that swamp after sunset. I’d get so lost, not even you could find me.”

“Ah, you’d manage.”

Jack sipped, and looked uncomfortable. Lies always made him uncomfortable.

“So.” Johnny leaned back in the chair. “Court.”

The comment sounded innocent, but Jack wasn’t fooled. “Okay, fine. Your stepfather called and asked me to stop by the house before coming here. He had a lot to say; it took some time.”

“Let me guess. He’s worried about me.”

“He says you showed up black and blue and cut halfway to the bone, that you could have died alone in this place.” Jack held up a thumb and forefinger. “He said that far as he could tell, it was about this close, that you were busted up and bleeding and that you’d damn near broken your back.”

“Do I look that bad?”

Johnny swirled bourbon in the glass, and Jack frowned because Johnny appeared to be fine. The smile was easy and amused, one eyebrow slightly raised. “Clyde wants me to convince you to move back home, or to town, at least. He says this has gone on long enough. He says your mother—”

-1—

0—

+1—

"Don't bring my mother into this."

Jack refused to back down. "He says your mother has nightmares of losing another child. That it's affecting her happiness."

"She only *thinks* she wants me close. You've seen how it is when she looks at me."

"Maybe."

"You know it's true."

"It's time to come home, Johnny."

"You think you can convince me?"

"I think you need my help, and that because of that you should listen to me more than you might normally do."

Something moved in Johnny's eyes, and it was stark and dangerous and quick. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"Do you need my help or not?"

Johnny put down the glass, and the hard eyes softened. "Maybe."

"Is that why you showed up at my office, unannounced? Why you frightened and offended my assistant? Because *maybe* you need my help?"

Johnny rolled his shoulders. "I was just messing around."

"She wanted to call the police."

"Come on . . ."

"You threatened to break my arm, Johnny. She said, and I quote: 'He's the single most intense man I've ever met.' She's met a lot of men, Johnny. Judges. CEOs. Whatever you said or did, you worried her."

"That's ridiculous. You're my best friend."

"I know that. She doesn't."

"What do you want from me, Jack? What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to be honest."

"Aren't I always?"

"Not about this place. Not all of it."

Johnny stared off at darkened trees and distant water. "Will you help me or not?"

Jack considered the contradiction so evident in his friend. Johnny was the most independent soul Jack had ever known, but his need showed; it showed in the stiff shoulders and unmoving gaze, in the unnatural stillness. "How broke are you?"

—1

—0

—+1

Johnny shrugged again, swallowed bourbon and dragged up a shadow of a smile. "Too broke to hire another lawyer."

"Is any of it left?"

He meant the insurance money, so Johnny dug into his pocket and tossed a sheaf of bills on the table. Jack picked it up, put it back down.

"That's three hundred dollars."

"Three hundred and seven."

"What about the rest of it?"

"Lawyers."

"All of it."

"Yep."

"Jesus, Johnny, you do have other options."

"Don't tell me to sell land."

"You own six thousand acres."

"I won't sell it, Jack. Not an acre. Not half an acre."

"I hear what you're saying, but the math is simple. You can do nothing and risk losing all of this, or you can sell a thousand acres to save the other five. Even at fire sale prices, you'd have enough money to hire another lawyer. Hell, hire three. You'd have money in the bank and still be the fourth-largest landowner in the state of North Carolina."

"All that law school, and that's your best advice? To sell?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Johnny put down his glass, the black eyes flashing. "To be drained and timbered? So some rich banker can bring his friends out to four-wheel and trophy-hunt and disrespect everything I love about this place?"

The despair and anger were hard to watch. Johnny inherited the land on his eighteenth birthday, but other people had claims, too, and those claims had merit. Johnny won on the merits at trial, but the risks on appeal were legitimate. To keep the land, he needed a heavy hitter from one of the big firms. That meant five hundred an hour, maybe even six.

"This was my family's land, Jack, the last of it that hasn't been chopped up and sold off and ruined. I won't let it go without a fight."

"Okay, let's forget the appeal for a moment. How will you live with-

out money? What if you get hurt and can't hunt? What about gasoline? Property taxes? Medical care?"

"All I need is a lawyer."

"I'm five days into the job, for God's sake! You need appellate work at the highest level."

"You're capable enough."

"How can you say that?"

"Because you finished college in three years and law school in two. Plus you're my only friend."

"That's not fair."

"It's what I have."

"Goddamn it." Jack walked to the edge of the ferns and showed Johnny his back. "Can we just drink?" he said. "Can we drink bourbon and eat catfish and worry, tomorrow, about the rest of it?"

"You owe me, Jack." The words came as carefully as metal drawn from an unhealed wound. "I've never let the memories come between us, not in ten years. I've kept you out of that, kept it separate."

"I know you have."

"No one else can help me."

Jack nodded, five good digits on the glass, the small ones curled white. "The stakes are big, Johnny. Your land, your life." He gestured at all of it. The forest. The water. "I'm not sure I want that on my head."

"Are you scared?" Johnny asked.

"Are you kidding? I'm fucking terrified."

Terrified was a big word between young men, and in the space behind it, Johnny showed a twist of smile and sudden, startling sympathy. "Then don't worry about it," he said. "Tomorrow's problem."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Sit. Drink."

Jack did as he was told, and Johnny topped off the glass.

Jack drank that down, too.

It was dead quiet when Jack woke alone in the cabin. He bolted up, heart pounding.

What had woken him?

—1

—0

—+1

He didn't know, but felt horribly afraid, a scraping in his mind like nails on glass.

Was it a dream?

His feet touched the bare floor, and when he stood, the dizziness pressed him sideways. He leaned on the wall, but it was not enough to steady him. He tugged his shirt, bent at the waist. When he straightened, he felt his way to a chair by the window and fell into it, one hand on his chest, sweat slick on his face and neck. Pale light spilled onto the table, but all else was shadowed and gray: the corners and low places, the dead space beneath his chair. Looking through the glass, he saw mist in the trees, the weak light of a false dawn.

"Johnny?"

Opening the door, he stepped into a world so still, it looked painted. No insects called; the frogs were silent. A dozen steps carried him to a trail through the ferns, and then to a place beneath the trees. It was dimmer there, and cooler. Beyond him was the swamp, the smell of black mud and rot. Going there made no sense, but dreams never did, and this felt like a dream: the silver haze, the sense of choking. He wanted to wake in his own bed, but the mist was thinning and someone stood at the edge of the swamp.

Johnny?

He didn't know if the word escaped his lips or not. Sound died in the mist, and Johnny was unmoving. He stood in black water, shirtless in jeans that were wet from the knees down. The muscles of his shoulders rolled and twitched, and Jack hugged himself as he stopped at the water's edge to watch his friend stare into a silence so complete, it seemed as if the swamp itself were holding its breath.

"What are you doing, man?" No response or movement. "Johnny?"

"Do you see it?"

Jack followed his friend's gaze; saw water and darkness and, far out, an island. "What do you mean?"

Johnny pointed into the swamp. "Don't you see?"

"There's nothing there. Come on, man."

But Johnny didn't answer, and the arm stayed up. Looking again, Jack saw switchgrass and trees and, somewhere behind all that, a swell

of light that was a rising moon. Jack stepped into the water to look at Johnny's eyes, which were glazed and barely open. "Johnny, man. Hey. You okay?"

Jack touched his shoulder, and Johnny blinked once. "Jack," he said. "What's happening?"

"I think you're sleepwalking."

"It's cold."

Johnny wasn't wrong about that. His lips were blue, his skin like ice. Even Jack felt it: the chill, dense air with no business in the damp and heat of an August swamp. "Do you remember how you got here?"

Johnny said nothing.

"You were talking to me. Do you remember that?"

Johnny blinked again, and it was half speed. He dragged fingers across his eyes as if to strip off cobwebs.

"All right." Jack took Johnny's arm. "You're dreaming, man, that's all. Let's get you back to the cabin."

Johnny resisted at first, then drew a foot from the mud and turned for the shore. He allowed himself to be led, and for that instant Jack believed his own lie, that chance alone had brought them both to the edge of the swamp. But with every step, it felt more like a falsehood. The world was hushed and heavy, the air as cold as something dead. That wasn't an exaggeration. The temperature was falling by the second, Jack's breath a sudden plume. "The cabin," he said, and it was like a prayer. Because a deeper fear was descending with the cold—he felt it in his skin and along his spine, a prickling as if some dreadful thing was close. "Come on, Johnny." Jack pulled hard, but his friend was rooted like a stump in the mud, pointing again as, beyond him, a hollow place appeared in the mist. It looked like no specific thing, but hung shapeless and still against the rising moon. Looking at it, Jack couldn't describe what he felt, but it was as if all the cold and fear radiated out from that dull splotch of empty air.

"Do you see it?" Johnny said.

But Jack was pulling harder. He wanted light and heat, to be anywhere but this fucking swamp. "Damn it, Johnny! Come on!" He added his small arm to the strong, broke one foot free and then the other. They

—1
—0
—+1

moved slowly at first, then faster, dark water splashing, feet dragging in the mud. Jack was first from the water, and Johnny followed. He stumbled into the ferns, and when his feet touched ground, the cold and terror broke.

Crickets called from the trees.

Frogs, in the reeds, were singing.

Jack got Johnny to the cabin, but his friend moved as if held up by strings; dropped in the bed as if those strings were suddenly cut. Jack left him and checked the windows, the door. A breeze moved the trees outside. The mist was lifting.

What just happened?

Already, the memory was fading, fear lifting like the mist. Jack looked at the mud between his toes. That was real. So was the blood on his hands and feet, the scratches from where he'd fallen and run and fallen again. There was no lock on the door, so he wedged it tight and sat against it with his back braced. When dawn broke he checked Johnny and the windows. Ten minutes later he opened the door and stepped outside. His watch said 6:25. The light was watery, the morning hot and getting hotter.

Why did that feel strange?

The memories were there, but fragmented. He recalled air like ice, the fog of his breath.

Jack peered through the trees and followed the trail to the swamp. The soil was damp under his feet. He touched a tree, and that, too, felt like the memory of a dream.

At the water's edge, he tried to hold the images that troubled him, but the more he squeezed, the more elusive they seemed. He'd stood on this very ground. So had Johnny.

Why had they been so afraid?

The more he worked the question, the more it disturbed him. *Fear* was not even the right word. He'd been *terrified*.

Looking at the swamp now, it was hard to believe. Everything appeared soft in the morning light, the islands distant, the waters dappled.

Had they really come to this place?

Jack stood for a long time, but like every dream he'd ever had, the images faded until only glimmers remained.

Was it nightmare or was it real?

When Jack returned to the cabin, he found Johnny feeding twigs into the coals of last night's fire. "Good morning, Counselor. Coffee in five."

Jack hesitated, watching his friend for a sign that he remembered anything about last night. His attention fixed on the fire, Johnny looked as he had on a hundred other mornings, half asleep and relaxed. He built the fire up, put an old coffeepot on the grate. "There's bread," he said. "I'll make bacon in a bit."

"You feel all right, Johnny?"

"You kidding? I feel great."

He poked at the coals, rubbed his cheek and left a smudge of soot. He'd not yet looked up, so Jack took a chair across the fire. "How'd you sleep?"

"Deep and sound."

"Johnny, look at me." Johnny did. "You went to sleep last night in the tree. You woke in the cabin."

Johnny's eyes glazed for a moment; then he shrugged. "Sleepwalking, I guess. It happens."

"That doesn't scare you?"

"I'm here," he said. "I'm fine."

"You remember nothing about last night?"

"We stayed up late. We drank too much."

"What else?"

"We talked about your dad in prison, your mom in that shit-box trailer. You told me how it feels to practice law. You fell down once, taking a leak."

"That wasn't funny."

"Yeah, it was."

Johnny laughed again, but Jack was still serious. "That's it? That's all?"

"Of course that's not all." Johnny stopped poking at the fire. "We finished the manchego before the bourbon. You liked the catfish, but

—1

—0

—+1

thought you'd swallowed a bone. We smoked cigars, told jokes, solved the riddles of the universe. It was dinner, Jack, like every other dinner we've ever had out here."

"What about after?"

"There was no after. I went to bed. I woke up. Here we are."

Jack stopped pushing. Two minutes later he made up his mind. "Listen, I'm going to get out of here."

"What? Seriously?"

Jack stood and smoothed palms across his thighs. "I'm not feeling it."

"Okay. Well, shit." Johnny stood, too. "You want me to walk you out?"

"No, I'm good."

Jack found his boots and pulled them on. Johnny watched, conflicted. Days like this meant something to both of them. Normally they fished or hunted or shot skeet; breakfast was always a big deal. Johnny opened his mouth twice before he finally spoke. "About the lawyer business—"

"It's not that."

"Then, why are you leaving?"

Jack picked up his jacket and looked across the clearing. He'd never fully understood Johnny's desire to live in this place, but if he chose to live as a hermit, it was Jack's place to be there for him. Part of that stemmed from childhood and mutual obligation; part of it was that they lived as brothers. That meant they trusted, supported, accepted. But today was different, and Jack felt the change as surely as he smelled coffee on the morning air.

Johnny was lying.

By the time Jack returned to the small apartment he kept above a bakery downtown, his suspicion had only grown. Something in Johnny's laugh, and in the way his eyes moved. With the door locked and lights off, Jack pulled off muddy clothes, lay on the bed and considered the very real chance his best friend was a liar. The thought troubled him, and Jack chewed on it for a long time, hating it; but it was in dreams that a more

disturbing truth found him. He stood in black water, and in the wan light Johnny was shirtless beside him. His eyes were half-closed, his hands turned up as if to catch a falling rain. Everything was real: the water on his shins, the cold air and fear. Jack watched Johnny point, but was afraid to look.

Do you see?

Jack didn't see; didn't want to.

Jack . . .

Jack looked that time, but not where Johnny pointed. He looked at eyes glazed black and muscles that gathered and twitched. Maybe Johnny was afraid. Maybe he was like Jack.

Tell me what you see.

But the fear was too real, and Jack too ashamed. He closed his eyes, and when they opened, he was awake in an apartment that smelled of bread baking. The sky outside was dim, the sheets twisted and damp.

"It's not possible."

But it was.

Johnny's stepfather had spoken to Jack of injuries from a fall, of bruises black as ink and cuts so deep, they went halfway to the bone. That's why he'd called Jack in the first place, because Johnny had fallen and almost died. With the bourbon and the mist, Jack had forgotten, but not now. He wanted to deny the sudden truth, but blinked and saw Johnny, as he'd been last night, and not just in the dream. He was shirtless and still and flawless.

There wasn't a mark on him.