

Chapter 1

A family of possums goes stiff as taxidermy in the sweep of our high beams. Their irises shine like nickels and dimes, coins on the eyes of the dead. But headlights won't stop Spirits from sneaking up on us. Hidden halfway downhill where the pine turns to hickory, it's the only bar around that serves hard liquor, and only because it sits *this side of* the county line. Lumber cars rounding the bend for the sawmill. That's how passing the place sounds, the clickety-clack of some Johnny Cash track ramping up then fading away, same as the craving. Not until our taillights paint the bar barn-red does Jack take his foot off the gas, riding the brakes into the valley through a blizzard of blanched moths. He parks in the back lot of Free Will and grabs his thermos from the cup holder, pretending I'm in it, alive and well. Just the opposite of playing possum.

We enter through a side door propped open with a trash can and get caught between two camps that have traded the bottle for lesser vices. Those who smoke Reds *and* take their Folgers black are the most spastic oversharers. Speaking of which. Here comes Chip.

The floor beneath me quakes as Jack lifts a hand from the thermos to greet his sponsor, nicknamed for his role of handing out tokens to anyone who makes it a day, a month, a full year, hallelujah. The newcomers still shoot Jack dirty looks when they see him carrying me around. But for old-timers like Chip, the fevered speculation has mellowed into a reluctant acceptance of what they figure to be a security blanket, same as an ex-smoker gnawing on a toothpick. As long as Jack doesn't take a swig from that thermos, he seems harmless enough. So they stop short of asking about it. Like every other night.

Then again, there is something different about tonight. By my count Jack's footsteps take us past his usual seat in the back of the basement. He lowers himself into the chair at the fore, what would've been the pulpit one floor above. Being in an underbelly makes the meeting feel as subversive as it is sacred, likely what lured Jack in. People from every suburb and street corner of Show Low take their seats, placing Big Books in their laps to paperweight their skittish bodies. Binges have blown me to the West Coast and back, but never have I come across such motley

solidarity. Not among uptown and downtown junkies who share the same broiled spoon, not even among these folks beyond these walls. The biker and the banker, the stripper and the stay-at-home mom. They're all here, closer than kin, setting aside their clubs and cliques for now.

I know it's nine o'clock when Jack coughs twice and the others fall silent. They even silence their cellphones, more attentive than any audience that ever sat through one of his desperate sales pitches.

"Jack," he says. "Alcoholic."

Flicking their cigarettes into the night, the stragglers notice only now that he's groomed for once. Before we left the cabin, he took his time getting ready. Pruning that briar of a beard into a shapelier hedge. Raking his matted hair to either side of a pale seam. Donning a dry-cleaned shirt with so much starch it nearly took on a life of its own, the chest puffed up proudly with or without him. All in all his appearance is heartbreakingly tame, that of a criminal finally up for parole.

"If she was still around, my wife would tell you 'I'm sorry' is just about the hardest thing to say, but that it's even harder to say 'You're forgiven.' She'd also tell you our son inherited my stubbornness, though she thanked God he wasn't as much a mule as me due to the watering down of genes. And I guess she was right. Because after the accident that left her broken, he didn't try to apologize for years, and I didn't accept it even when he did."

Jack broods into the thermos through the peephole where the straw goes. I look up and see the bleary watercolor of his cyclops eye.

"By not letting him make amends with me and his mom, I cut him short at Step Nine. That's why I showed up here to begin with. Not to take the first Step for myself, but to carry my son through the rest."

With the deepest breath he'd drawn since the day he tried to drown himself, Jack leans back in that folding chair and cracks his knuckles as if preparing to handle heavy equipment.

"That's what I aim to do tonight. Tell my story honest as I can and finish the Twelfth Step with my son."

Jack rattles me around that insulated echo chamber, the hollow sound making all of us salivate with remembrances of refills.

"I turned him into an ice cube, believe it or not. Here's how it happened."