

Now

By the time he spots the edge of the cliff, he's already falling. No burst of music or slow motion. Only one frightened step backward that finds the ground and then another that finds open air. His stomach jumps, ears fill with wind, eyes with a whirl of clouds, a flash of green lichen on a rock, shaped exactly like a rabbit. The forest floor hurtles toward him.

He rolls to a stop and splays on his back downhill from the bluff. Jaws at the air as his lungs work open, fingers clawing in the dead leaves. The damp soaks into his coat but he doesn't turn over, as if moving would concede something. He sips breaths. Blinks at the sheet of clouds. Everything will be okay in a moment. Leaves crinkle against his ears.

The bluff looms twenty feet high above him. Beyond, bare oaks and snarls of brush run up the mountain—a Missouri mountain, more of a big hill swelling under the forest. Bleached

winter trees, leaf cover, sporadic limestone cliffs emerging from the hillside like molars from receding gums.

Eyes fixed on the bluff, he checks his body, flexes his hands, rolls his neck. His fingers walk along his ribs below the sooty field coat that he stole last fall from one of the cabins at the edge of the forest. His thighs goose-bump below a thin pair of soccer shorts. He spits a bit of leaf into his beard.

A rain cloud skulks above the hills. He watches it come and then sits up. Gasps and flops back, cringing. Reluctantly looks down at his legs.

On the inside of his right knee, a knob protrudes from the skin. A glossy wooden handle, as thick as a novelty pencil, stabbed into the soft divot below the kneecap. He gapes at it. Blood wells and spills off in a thin line.

"That seems right," Bish says. "Yep. That's about par for the course."

"It's okay," Mick whispers. He reaches shakily for the knee. "It's okay."

The handle is from a homemade hand rake that he had been using above the bluff to poke in the leaves for early morels. The rake part is snapped off. The handle repurposed from an old barbecue tool. Imprinted along the side in bold letters is the word **SPICY**.

"I guess this all could've gone better," Bish muses. "I'd give it, I dunno, six out of ten."

"It's okay."

Mick prods the handle and yanks his hand back. The wound looks like a rubber prop, a Halloween costume. He adjusts his seat and the handle shifts deep below the kneecap. He gags and looks away.

“Lying here like someone’s coming to save you. Maybe one of those big dogs with the little barrel on its neck.”

Mick blinks up at the woods as if waking in a stranger’s bedroom. Gray trunks, running on forever until they merge into shadow. Across the valley the next hillside of bare trees rears up, and the next and next. At the base of the bluff, the mushroom field guide lies in the leaves beside his fallen pack. The butt of his rifle flags out of a nest of brush.

The cold is crawling out of the ground into his bare legs.

“Wishing for a mulligan on those shorts, huh?” Bish says, obnoxious, pretending to chew gum. “Don’t like the weather in Missouri, wait five minutes, huh? Might snow again. Probably should’ve worn snow pants, huh?”

“It felt like spring. Hopeful.”

“It did. And now, this.”

The looming rain cloud dims the woods and turns Mick’s breath to fog. Blood pulses inside the knee. With two fingers he tugs at the handle, but it doesn’t budge. He clears his throat and busies himself plucking ammunition from the leaves and returning it to his jacket pocket, and then he buttons his coat, and then he fiddles with a bootlace, and then there’s nothing to do except stare at the wound.

The handle has three grooved ribs at the bottom for easy grip.

“Right, let’s do this, bro.” Bish smacks his tongue. “If I know anything about doctoring—and I definitely do—you pull that stick and you’re gonna bleed out, stat. But if you leave it in your leg’s gonna rot off. Gangrene, you know, the dreaded whatever. In either case, one thing’s for sure. We’re gonna need a lot of CCs.”

Mick grunts a laugh and then glances again at the cliff. A coil of brush hides the top. His eyes drift down to his rifle at the foot of the bluff.

“You seemed so sure-footed up there, bro. You startle easy.”

“Just a twig snapping. An animal.”

“Animal. Sure.”

The breeze slackens and the woods go still. No squirrels darting through the leaves. The deer swarmed last fall when they went unhunted, but lately, nothing. Only birds and bugs. Without wind in the branches, the birdcalls stab through. Chirps, warbles, shrieks, hundreds of them, singing for each other, choking the woods.

Dead leaves have blown over his right shin. If he lies here long enough, the woods will swallow him whole. This is all he will have in the end. The bare trees, this ground under him, this air in his lungs.

He sets his jaw. Draws a pocketknife from his coat. He presses the flat edge of the blade beside the wound to brace the skin. Grips the handle and takes a breath. Pulls.

A wire tightens between his ears. The birdcalls drop out. For a moment, there isn't a thought in his head.

The wound is small and gaping like a fish's mouth. He fumbles off a boot, peels off a sock, and ties it around the knee for a bandage. Climbs to his feet. The broken handle lies in the leaves, surrounded by pennies of drying blood.

The woods wake with rain as he limps to his day pack and rifle. He stutter-steps for a hundred yards to where the bluff dips back into the hillside. He squints uphill.

“Wandered too far from camp,” Bish says. “We must be all the way around the mountain.”

He starts hiking up and then halts and grimaces at the knee. Something grinds in the center.

“This is bad, bro.”

“I’ve been hurt before.”

“But this is worse.”

“Yeah. This is worse.”

After a few minutes of climbing, the rain thickens and he has to lug his right thigh with one hand. He glances at the top of the bluff as he climbs past and then keeps his eyes on his boots.

Any step forward, the Red Book says, is a step in the right direction. Movement is improvement. Progress is everything.

Miles of ash-brown hillsides make up the national forest. He never meant to be so isolated, but the first camps made him nervous, too close to the hiking trail. In those first days last spring, he stumbled across the fresh remains of campfires. Then he spent some paranoid and sleepless nights in an abandoned shack and then time grew diaphanous as he searched for the ideal campsite—water access, fewer ticks, hiking distance to cabins for stealing supplies—because only once he was settled and his food was secure and the firewood was cut and the leaks plugged in his shelter, only then could he figure out a plan.

He wound deeper into the woods. Farther from the real world. Things would cool down out there. Back to normal. This was only temporary. And then it was winter.

The hill grows slick and steep and he has to use his hands. His legs rubber underneath him and he lands on all fours in the

mud. Pulls himself back up. Keep walking. Getting somewhere. Almost home.

A shot rings out.

Mick spins and lands on his haunches. Something crashes in the brush downhill. There's a faint yelp, and then the rain seals off the sound.

He fumbles with the rifle, racks back the bolt and digs a .22 round from his pocket and chambers it. His eyes dart around the shadowed spaces between trees. Jaw heart-beating against the stock of the little rifle. Rain rolls through his beard.

"A falling branch," he whispers.

"A shot," Bish says.

"The wind."

"A scream."

The gunsight scans the woods. Everything had seemed bare from up close, but down the slope, there's a green haze between trees.

He slings the gun onto his back and lurches to his feet. The knee throbs like a cork pressed too far into a bottle. His hands are numb and purplish when he steadies himself on a tree, squinting toward the hilltop, but it's hidden by woods.

"You're not lost," Bish mutters. "Not really. Circle around. Don't go over the top. You've got weak thighs. You got your mom's thighs."

"We're almost to the top. Shortest route. This is what we're doing. You pick a direction, you stick with it. *'Focusing on your present—'*"

"*—is an investment in your future.*' Yeah, bullshit. Know what's really an investment in your future? Investments, bro."

Mick checks over his shoulder. No more sounds downhill. He keeps climbing.

The sock bandage slips down his shin and he gives up on fixing it. Rain soaks the strips of pillowcase that fill out his oversize boots. The temperature has plummeted. Ice sheens the twigs overhead. His numb toes feel like they could snap off if he steps wrong.

He slips on a wet root and lands hard on the bad knee. Rocks on all fours, teeth clenched.

He doesn't have to stand back up. He could sit here and let the cold take him.

"You know those people who disappear?" Bish says. "Those cold cases where they grabbed a suitcase and left their wallet on the hotel bed and they're just—poof—gone. And you wonder what they did next, right? You picture them dyeing their hair in a bus-station bathroom or drinking daiquiris on a Thai beach or getting old alone in a cabin. But you know what they actually did?"

A bird calls through the downpour.

"Think of Alison out there," Bish says. "Picturing you on a beach."

Mick swallows, shakes out his arms, groans to his feet. With stones and sticks he marks his wayfinder symbol on top of the leaves so it can't wash away, a circle crossed with two sticks, an arrow pointing in the direction he's headed, and then he hikes perpendicular to the slope to ring around the mountain. The rain lets loose. Pounding his scalp and smearing his vision. He staggers with one hand out to fend off branches. Mud and rocks and gullies along the slope. The trees are strung with humming piano wire. He walks until he's barely aware of it. His legs are a stranger's stumping underneath him.

And then he halts. A familiar boulder sticks out from the hillside ahead like the bow of a ship. Six feet up on a maple tree

is his wayfinder, the circled X with the arrow, the bark healing around the carved symbol like a fist pressed into dough.

Mick exhales and clasps his hands together. Through the dim light he can see another mark on a tree ahead.

He follows the signs until he spots the small clearing between the trees and limps into camp past the lean-to kitchen and the smoldering fire ring. Some of the leaf insulation has slipped off the dome of his hut, revealing the slick blue tarp underneath.

The light inside the shack is tinged blue. The pallet floor is swept clean and the cot is made. A bedside table holds a flashlight, a hook on the side for a rifle stand, a thin paperback book with a worn red cover. He fumbles with laces and buttons until his naked body glows like a pale moon, clutches a washcloth to the knee and slumps onto the cot, wrestles the damp leg into his sleeping bag, piles on blankets and shakes until the nerves in his feet start to prick. Heat still trickles from the Dutch oven beneath the cot, filled with rocks from the fire ring this morning. He pours water into a mug and sets it on the pot to warm. The tarp shudders under the rain. Gaps in the insulation let constellations of daylight dance along the ceiling.

He turns on his side, fetal position, pulls the blankets up to his mouth. His breath steams into the fabric. Rain sweeps the woods. Thunder rises from the ground and closes him in its fist.

The rain has slowed when he realizes he's awake. Sweating under the polyester blanket. He winces and sits up. The right knee is swollen and red as a newborn. Heat prickles under the skin.

He searches the wall of plastic bins opposite the cot, twenty drawers labeled with masking tape and neat writing. ROPE, FISHING, READING, BATTERIES, SOCKS, HAND TOOLS, BUG STUFF, GOOD FINDS—a drawer filled with inscribed pocket watches, wedding-favor corkscrews, a carved backgammon set that he liked to run his fingers over. He opens FIRST AID.

In the mouth of the shack, he washes the knee with water from a milk jug and dabs it with iodine, tapes gauze in place, checks off first-aid steps in his head. In the Scouts, the books had taught gashes, sprains, heatstroke, tidy disasters with ink sketches of placid victims. A ragged puncture wound would mean it was time to call an adult.

He dresses with difficulty and then sits at the hut's entrance and scrubs at his fingernails with a brush and soap, runs a comb through his beard and trims stray hairs away from his lips without using a mirror. He breaks his own rule by pissing in the clearing, on the pine-branch flooring that he arranged during a boring winter day. With some stirring, the ashes of the fire release a wisp and the snap of a coal. He sits on a log below the lean-to, his back against the boulder wall, and scoops dry kindling into the fire pit from a trash bag, blows until a flame leaps into the twigs.

The lean-to gathers heat as he unties bungee cords from a bin stenciled with snowflakes from its previous life storing wrapping paper at a summer cottage. Inside are two packs of ramen, two freeze-dried camping meals, dry linguine, tomato paste, coriander and salt, eight cans of unappetizing vegetables, and a can of Chef Boyardee ravioli. He counts the food, calculating, and then slumps back against the rock.

"It's time, bro," Bish says. "That knee. Bad news."

Raindrops plunk on the plywood roof. Mick blows into his fingers and opens a can of peeled potatoes, pours them into a pot and sets it on a grill above the fire.

“Give it a couple of days. We’ll heal up. Get to the cabins. Get some food. Bag a deer if we have to.”

A drip through from the roof hisses in the fire. A hole rotting in the plywood. A woodpecker rattles somewhere off in the trees.

“‘Bag a deer.’ Who do you actually think you are, bro?”

“Stop.”

“Bear Grylls over here. Fuckin’ Davy Crockett. There’s no deer out here. All quiet.”

Mick scowls at the fire. Bish sighs.

“A doctor. Medicine. Civilization. That’s what you need. The real world. Other people. Not this little survivalist wet dream. You’ve been alone too long. Honestly, bro, I’m worried about you. I think you’ve been talking to yourself.”

The fire crackles.

“That was a joke.”

“Yeah, it was super funny, Bish. We’ll go back soon. We will.”

The potatoes twitch in the boiling pot. The woodpecker tocks in the distance.

“Almost a year, bro.”

“I know.”

“How could you let that happen? With Alison out there. Your mother. How could you?”

Mick taps the fork against his thigh and then spears a potato and lets it steam in his open mouth before chewing. When he’s finished he sets the starchy pot to soak in the rain. Drums his fingers on the log. The woodpecker gives up and leaves only the thrum of the rain.

He needs a task. A tarp to mend, kindling to cut, a bin to organize. Keep his hands busy. He stares into the rain and picks at his fingernails.

“With penance, at the end you forgive yourself,” Bish says. “You go out and seek it. Forgiveness.”

Mick pries a line of dirt from a cuticle, and then a second, and then studies the other stained fingers. Black lined. Hopeless.

“She won’t be waiting. You know that, right? Alison’s moved on. Maybe she won’t forgive you, but you owe her an explanation. Staying here makes it worse by the day.”

“You’re right. That she won’t forgive me.”

“You owe her.”

What he owes to Alison. To Rosalyn. What he owes to everybody.

“Go back to Bloom. You can’t get anywhere farther on that leg, anyway. Walk into town. Lazarus returning.”

Mick stares into the woods.

“There’s still a life to live, bro. Out there. The real world.”

The trees block the horizon. Only the spare clearing, the hut, the fire. This small life.

“Unless this is enough for you.”

Mick lowers his eyes from the camp. Shifts in his seat. Nods.

“Might be time. I dunno.”

“You do.”

“See how it all turned out.”

What he did. What he failed to do.

“I’ve got my head on straight now. When I left, I wasn’t myself.”

“Who were you?”

“I never meant to hurt her. Rosalyn. It was desperate times. I’m straightened out now. I’m fine. I am.”

The quiet of the clearing. The rain dwindles and then picks up again. Thuds into the ground. Rolls out through the trees and the hills and this vast emptiness.

"You're still afraid of it," Bish says. "Aren't you?"

"No."

"If it was just side effects. Hallucinations. If it was harmless."

"I never said harmless."

"Then what?"

Mick ponders the clearing.

"That it's only a machine. That's all it is."

"All right. I'm sure that once everything cleared up they came and took it away. You never have to see that thing again."

His eyes search the trees. The black box. Computers, phones, screens, windows to the wider world. To know what's happening out there. To see more than this camp, these trees and hills. This narrow existence.

"Unless, after everything, part of you wants to see it?"

Fingers tapping at the log. Thinking. Racing circles around a question that won't quite come to the fore.

"Do you still want Regression?"

He abruptly heaves himself to his feet and the knee buckles and nearly sprawls him into the fire. He slumps in the door of the hut and grabs the Red Book from the bedside table. On the cover, etched in pen, his wayfinder symbol.

The past doesn't exist, the Red Book says, only the polygraph needle of the present. Make your own truth. Draw the hills and valleys of your future.

A snap echoes in the distance and he stiffens. Settles back down. Only a branch. The dead limbs finally coming down.

He has heard unexplainable things in these woods. Shrieks of dying animals that border on words. Cackles that he can't

identify. On one moonless night he cowered in the hut while something massive and impossible moved through the trees in the distance. He has seen wind sweep over a valley and send the tree canopy writhing and the vast earth set alive, mysterious, unfathomable.

But now it's only trees. Inert material, soil, rocks, wood. He sees it clearly now. The rotting lean-to, the slipping tarp on the hut. The mused pine branches for flooring and the dirty tote bins.

In the doorway of the hut, a praying mantis sways on spindly legs. Mick pulls his hand away. The insect glides back and forth, pointless movement, opaque intentions. Harmless, unsettling. An alien presence. Approaching this giant being, as if it has a death wish. Stark green against the winter gray.

He stands and moves away. His eye catches color at the edge of camp. Green shoots rising between dead leaves. That's how it arrives, the world tilting. Spring.