

AMERICAN SIEGE: A NOVEL

by

Justin Lafreniere

A Thesis

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

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American Siege: A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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DEDICATION

For my parents and Dani

&

For Alison

&

For Alan

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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN SIEGE: A NOVEL

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This thesis is a work of fiction, and so why you've come to it I can't say. How you ended up here, I don't know. You must be hopelessly lost. But if you're curious, in *American Siege*, James Middleton narrates his life trapped in the city with no country, serving as both a propagandist for a dangerous militia and an unwilling spy for the United States government. When an ultranationalist coalition, captures the city of Charlotte, James finds himself in the sudden and unexpected company of his college friend: Nicholas Brewer, former Congressman from South Carolina and political head of the American Reclamation. Convinced by a single violent episode, James agrees to become an artist in the employ of this antigovernment force. But James begins to suspect that the American Reclamation isn't the force for good he believed. When approached by government agents who threaten or do anything to break the siege, James faces betraying his friend or putting himself, and the lives of others, in grave danger. With an interest in the political ramifications of hyper-partisanship, political art and steganography, and an exploration of

the messy relationship between loyalty and preservation, this book invokes the political thriller in literary fashion.

CHAPTER ZERO

I had spent the night at work, finishing the art on an advertisement campaign the client would never see and sleeping on the couch in our creative lounge until it was late morning and I was confused and then worried no one else had come in. My cell didn't have service, which wasn't rare, and so I had no idea what had happened until I drove home through the newly occupied city and members of the American Reclamation stopped me every so often as part of the network of checkpoints they had arranged throughout the city. At each, they stood around with rifles and in ragtag uniforms that seemed related only on a conceptual level; common themes were camouflage, Gadsden Flags, Tea Party and "Make America Great Again" shirts and hats, bandanas with American and Confederate flags. They milled about and all asked the same questions, read off of 3x5 index cards:

"Are you sick? Do you have any known major health issues?"

"Are you older than 50?"

"Are you active or reservist military? Do you work for the government or law enforcement?"

"Are you a student, tourist, or reside somewhere other than the city of Charlotte?"

"Are you a Democrat and a gun owner?"

"Are you a doctor, nurse, utility worker, firefighter, or paramedic?"

And a dozen more questions at least, and at each checkpoint there was a line of people taking this test, a perverse gameshow where lucky “Yes”-answering contestants packed themselves aboard crowded CATS busses that idled on the shoulders of the interstates or in nearby parking lots, busses that eventually would drive north on I-85 and deposit them at Concord Mills, just outside the occupied zone.

It took me two hours to get back to my apartment complex. I had to park on the street. Four pickups blocked the lot, and so I walked towards my where neighbors congregated in front of my building. They seemed fixated on two men standing on the porch landing, their hands on the dark, lean bodies of rifles. Like the men at the checkpoints, they were dressed conservatively.

A man who lived in another building and that I only saw walking with a thin, tawny lab near sunset, pointed me out and the crowd shifted, their attention on me now. The crowd bristled with a focused, nervous current. My stomach had the sensation of falling off a high building and my skin prickled into gooseflesh. One of the armed men on the stairs gestured for me to come forwards, telling people to clear a path. It wasn't necessary: they'd parted for me into an aisle, a human funnel that watched with fear and awe. I felt famous and infamous, like Edison heading to the stage to demonstrate some grand new invention, or to electrocute an elephant. I kept thinking I should keep walking and shouldn't stumble on the stairs.

Neither man had followed me, and so I found myself standing stupefied in the hallway. I might as well have forgotten where I lived and where I was going, at least for a moment. The white walls and seagreen carpet struck me as new. Was the entryway

always so dim? Had they still not fixed that overhead light? And then like a shock it came back to me. I quickstepped up to my apartment and four large men made my living room and kitchen seem claustrophobically small looked at me as I came in. They had made themselves at home. One sat on the couch, reading a book that wasn't mine. A fat, bald head banged against the top of the fridge as he turned towards me. The one nearest stepped closer, nearly standing on my toes. He had skin wrinkled and grayed like fraying wool and large hands that patted roughly across my jeans and shirt until he was satisfied I wasn't hiding a weapon or anything.

“Mr. Brewer is out on the patio,” he said. “Been waiting.”

Nick was smoking a cigar. Its flint plume came at me in a wisp as he turned, smiled with one side of his lips to keep his smoke in place. He hugged me, the cigar somewhere behind my right ear. More of its rancid smoke trailed off, combining with the serrated anxiety hollowing out my breastbone and making me nervous and ill. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

And he began to tell me. How the American Reclamation had captured the city. How it was a new daybreak, the end to the long night of the government and the left and a coalition of un-American forces. How this was the first step to recapture the heart of the American people, to take back the land and country, city by city. How this was everything he had been planning since his abrupt exit from Congress, how this was the way reclamation would be realized.

While he spoke, I stared off the balcony. I felt like he might sense my fear if I looked at him. And so instead I looked at the flowers my neighbor, Ms. Gallot, so

carefully tended. I tried to remember their smell from between their purple petals like upside-down bells.

“This is a beautiful city,” he said. I turned back towards him. He looked as if he were trying to appraise the city from my 6x6 balcony. “It had to be a beautiful city. Wouldn’t work in one of those written-off slums. Detroit, or Chicago. One where the left has already driven the public into the ground and still made the people feel like they owe their government. Everyone’s on welfare or in a union, or fighting themselves and the police. Those cities don’t possess the right sort of patriotism.”

“So this is what you’ve been doing since you resigned from Congress?”

“I’ve been thinking about this since that thug Tavish shot Sunter.”

And so that’s where I was on April 13, when the city of Charlotte fell. Fairly peaceably, according to reports. Every once in a while there was the crackle of gunfire or sirens whirling through the streets. But by and large the changing of the guard had gone smoothly overnight to early morning. The local government, the police, the FBI offices and other institutions left with a bit of dignity and safety as the city changed hands, from republic to militia, from the American Experiment to the American Reclamation. Meanwhile the military amassed outside the city. Their perimeter stretched just beyond I-485. And Nick told me that he would need to go soon, but he had a task for me. If I did it, if I helped, he’d make sure that my life was disrupted as little as possible. “I’ll owe you,” he said. “I need your help.”

“You know I don’t care about politics,” I said.

“Not about politics. It’s about people.” He tossed his cigar down into the courtyard below. It exploded on the cobblestone in front of those purple, bell-shaped flowers.

“Isn’t this a little treasonous?” I asked.

“It’s the opposite. I think.”

CHAPTER ONE

As I waited in the park my eyes adjusted to the night and the night revealed a band of heather sky, wide and open and flat like a country road, steadily emerging amid the scores of stars that still seemed new, and white. I had lived in Charlotte five years and in all that time I had never thought of it as a city with stars. Usually light pollution kept it deep blue or, some nights, low-hung orange, metro glow. But for two weeks the skyscrapers had lain mostly dark. Mostly quiet. The whole city was that way. Freedom Park pond with its fish beneath unbothered by stars or dark, the pond that ran past the penned 301 steam engine, the little league fields, the greenway where the water disappeared and instead the bike paths and empty roads flowed out like tributaries to the heart of the besieged city. Still, I kept thinking the city might come alive any time. Every night felt like walking into a room and turning on the lights during a thunderstorm: the flick, the expectant heartbeat—and then the unbroken, lingering dark.

And then: a gasp of orange from my right, the sound of someone walking over the stone bridge towards me. Nick fenced his hand around a match while he lit a cigarette. “It’s good to see you, James,” he said.

“You too.”

Nicholas S. Brewer, the former Republican Congressman from South Carolina, turned from me to exhale his smoke away, towards Uptown. The wind brought it back. He shook my hand and pulled me into a hug, thumping his hand against my back. “I’m sorry that we had to wake you up, but it’s important.”

“It’s all right,” I told him. I saw him mostly in his cigarette’s orange shades: stubble on cheeks made more of shadow than skin and sinew, his eyes like peach pits. He looked cagey, unfamiliar. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s a nice park,” Nick said. “Good place to walk dogs, bring the kids I bet. Well, if you bothered with a dog or kids. No, you, you probably just sit...” His voice trailed off as he looked around, and then pointed up towards a hill backed on the far end by woods. “Up there. That’s where you sit and draw. Bet the farm on it.”

“How do you figure?”

“When you had some work up in that coffeehouse Tommy worked at, I asked you about one of your drawings. You said something like, ‘I like to be close enough to watch but distant enough I need to imagine the details.’ I thought it was interesting. Never forgot it.”

“Don’t remember that,” I said. “But yeah, I guess. Anywhere on the hill. But I don’t work here often. Not a lot of call for illustrations of park scenes doing graphic design. Usually if I’m here I’m just out walking, clearing my head when the apartment gets too small. When I don’t want to try thinking in a bar. The park closes after dark, but I never have any problems. Police don’t mind me very much, I think because they guess I’m just another drunk yuppie on my way home from the bars on East.” I pointed out over the pond. “They worry more about the college kids wandering through.”

Nick cleared his throat. That deliberate way. I was not supposed to mention the college. It was a two-block square postage stamp of higher learning that hadn’t seen a student in weeks. Only militiamen from the American Reclamation wandered the campus

now. Nick stayed part of the week in the president's house, orchestrating this whole thing.

"Earlier tonight a couple boys with us got lost near Lake Norman," Nick said.

"Ambushed by Marines, I guess. We've gotten them to agree to let us go and collect the bodies. It's just gotten back to me. I want to send you up there too and see what you can make of it."

"See what I can make of it?"

"It might be powerful. Something we can use."

"Jesus, Nick. That's," I said.

He was quiet.

"That's vile. Why would you?"

What I said, it deflated him. His head hung for a minute, ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't kill them. They were out there, they were beyond our lines and they were ambushed. I didn't kill them."

"No, but you're asking me to pimp their corpse."

He rounded on me, caught me by surprise. I flinched and coughed at the acrid smoke he blew into my face. "I'm asking because I trust you."

I managed to strangle out, "If I say no?" before I broke into another fit of coughing, doubling over. He reached out to steady me. "The other posters were one thing, you know? Information about rationing, curfew. That was to keep people safe. Help people."

The tip of his cigarette jostled like a firefly as he took another long drag from the stalk. He said, “People need our help outside the city too. Right now, they’re netted up like fish, but they barely know it. They know we’re here, know we’re fighting. We’re going to restore America. And you know I’m in the right on this. But I need people to see that we’re still fighting, that even though we’re in besieged just like they did in Oregon, we’re different. I need someone to talk to the American people. They killed those boys cold, James. I know it’s unpleasant. But they died for this. And you’re the only person I trust to do right by them and get a message out at the same time.”

“You’re asking for propaganda.”

“Know anyone better?”

This, he thought, was funny. There was the dim white flash of his broad smile. This, he thought, was funny, because when we had lived together and I was getting my MFA from the University of North Carolina, my artwork and critical interest had focused largely on modern propaganda. My entire thesis show was agitprop-pop art. If there was anyone qualified, it was me. And I suppose that’s why he had shown up the night everything started, not just to make sure that I was safe and to help me out. But because he knew eventually he would need this. The posters that I had done, those announcing curfews and outlining the rules for rations, weren’t about anything other than the new rules of law and order in the city. It was a bit of quid pro quo, Nick said, since he was going to convince his compatriots to give me special privileges. So I’d made a handful of posters, maybe ten by that night. Each time, I was driven to a graphic design shop—a competing firm, not my own workplace—near my apartment. The two guards, Michael

Quarry and Norm Otton, loitered about while I worked, and it never took more than three hours before they drove me back home. And I was grateful that Nick had worked this out. That life inside the siege was easier for me. Not just for me.

“Please,” he said.

I walked over towards the bandshell and sat on the stage. “Seems like I should get something from this.”

“You are.”

“No, Nick. I can do the work, or I can follow the rules. I don’t feel like doing both.”

Nick stepped towards the pond and threw his cigarette into the water; a pair of ducks that had been treading silently and unseen like brilliant spies lit off into the darkness. “What the hell are you doing, James? Who do you think you are?”

“I’m your friend. I have been, for a while now.”

He came back at me. I stood to meet him. The pack of cigarettes came out, then the lighter. He made no attempt to breathe that first short draft away from me. It was the same thing he’d done days after we met, basically strangers who’d signed a lease together. Two desperate middleclass kids, two broke graduate students. Both of whom needed a place to live for a year. Nick’s old roommate had moved back home, and I was just irresponsible about securing a roof over my head. Pretty quickly, we’d taken to disliking one another the way strangers in sudden, intractable proximity do, with a pettiness that gave way to friendship after a couple of difficult months. But always, anytime tempers flared, over the dishes or a late rent check or music too loud or my oil

paint stains on the coffee table, he'd come up to me and talk it out, almost always with that cigarette in his mouth. It got under my skin. And he was methodical about it. It struck me as so deliberate, how he used it to bother me. Another part of the meticulous mind.

He blew another, longer drag of smoke at me. I refused to turn away from it; my lungs flinched under my ribs like fighting birds as I fought the urge to cough. He said, "Do you understand what is going on in America? We are the backbone of this country, but they are trying to break us. They are trying to make sure that honest, patriotic, hardworking people are nothing. That is not going to happen. Our moment is here, now. One word to the wrong person...."

Another thing Nick did when we lived together: gave speeches. Some nights I would come home and find him standing in the mirror, his posture impeccable but his tie askew and his words slurred. Usually, whatever bottle he'd had too much from stayed in his hand as he pointed at himself, giving the speeches he'd memorized. Nixon, mostly. "Haven't changed a lick, have you? Giving me unnecessary lectures?"

"I just want you to listen."

"I have been listening. But you haven't. It isn't possible for her to talk to anyone. We spend time together. She will never find out what I'm doing. But you cannot leave me all alone out here," I said, gesturing to the dark city. "Not alone. I need her."

"They'll never go for it."

"They don't need to go for it, they just need to not care so much. You can convince them of that, right?"

“And if I do?”

I got up and walked towards the pond. At the edge, I alternated my stargazing with watching where the pinpoint white reflections fell on the water. “Promise me, Nick. She gets left alone, and the fact that I’m seeing her gets overlooked.”

Nick didn’t say anything, but I took it to mean we had a deal.

“Well, I’ll do it, I guess. Any thoughts on the art?”

Nick patted me on the shoulder. “Make it great.”

“Real helpful.”

“I try.”

“Are you coming with me?” I asked.

“No. A car will be here in a minute to pick you up and take you out there. Do you need anything from your apartment?”

“Yeah. Camera and a sketchbook, I guess.”

“I apologize for this whole cloak-and-dagger thing, but,” and Nick trailed off again. He took out another cigarette and lit it. Puffed smoke away from me. “You catch it, right? And you know that you cannot tell anyone about this.”

“Wouldn’t want to,” I said.

“No one.”

“It’s late. I’m tired. If you’re getting at something, fucking say it.”

“Just coming back around to the girl. You’ve been spending a lot of time with her.”

“Her name’s Beth, and I thought we had a deal.”

“I don’t think I can let you see her, James. What if she talks to someone?”

“Who? She can only talk to her aunt and me. And the only person I can talk to is her. We’re people. Social animals. We have to talk to someone, at some time. I don’t know why you’re so worried.”

“It’s dangerous for you to be interacting with someone who isn’t on our side.”

“How do you know what side she’s on?”

“She’s not in the American Reclamation; she’s not with us. That simple.”

“I’m not on your side yet,” I said. “I’m helping tonight, that’s it.”

“If you stop helping, you’ll just be like everyone else in the city: on your own. Think you’re alone now? You haven’t had to deal with rations, or curfews, or any of the hard parts of this. Somehow you’re making in through with a pretty blessed goddamn life at the moment. That all stops if you don’t help. I can help you, and I need you to help me. But you have to think of yourself as part of this. You have to do things to protect yourself, and me. Everyone else, too. Quarry, Norm. Everyone.” He blew a cloud of smoke, not bothering to turn away from me. “I know you aren’t interested in the politics, but there are people, real people like that girl and like those two dead boys who lives you can make better. You just have to help.”

“I understand, yeah, but—”

“Good. If it helps you can think of it like ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships.’”

“That poster says ‘Loose lips *might* sink ships.’”

“And you should not be the one who takes that risk. You should make our own version of that poster, for us.”

I sighed. “Maybe,” I said.

“Either way, you have to follow its advice. Do as I say, not as I do doesn’t work for revolutions, James.”

We heard an engine just then. It was far off, but the only sound that wasn’t us. Nick had flinched soon as he heard it and his cigarette dropped from his mouth to the sidewalk between us. After a moment, he crushed it under a black wingtip.

“Time to go,” he said.

“Dead brothers. What a thing.”

“Thank you, James. Thanks.” Nick shook my hand. Something about it felt formal, transactional. But I didn’t have time to say anything about that. A black SUV had pulled up on the other side of the cobblestone bridge and waited, its engine off and ticking like the panting of some mechanical grim. The headlights flashed once, then went off again. Nick didn’t walk with me as I went to the rear passenger door. The car sped off soon as my seatbelt clicked. At the brief stop at the apartment I wondered if Beth was already asleep, and as we drove towards out towards Lake Norman, part of me wanted to watch the empty roads, the weird, as we drove, but I let my head lean against the window and fell asleep. I wish I hadn’t. I wish I had seen that night more clearly. I might have been more aware of what the city looked like from the beginning. As it was, I slept and dreamt nothing until the driver woke me by punching me gently in the shoulder.

“We here,” he said.

“Here” meant parked on the shoulder of a winding backroad with no streetlights, blocked from going further by cars already staked out ahead and arranged vaguely in a

circle, lights towards a focal point that carved out a swath of light. This arrangement of highbeams cast the street gray, backlit those already there into ghostlike figures and shades milling about. Beyond the far edge of the circle, orange and red lights strobed atop an idling ambulance. I took the bag I'd packed with my camera and a notebook and stepped out of the car to slip and nearly fall on the loose soil of the roadside ditch.

Downhill, trees grew thickly. Had the brothers dashed between the trunks and gunfire?

“You coming?” asked the driver.

I followed him towards the circle.

In the center, the bodies of the boys.

I barely made it to the ditch before I vomited.

They were definitely just boys. Neither older than 20. They nearly looked like twins. Sandy hair cut the same way, brown eyes. Hawkish noses. But below that they differed. One brother's lips grimaced, discomforted by the last moments of his life. He rested on his stomach with his head turned towards his brother. One hand touched the other's shoulder, or clutched it, really. Like it was either hanging on or grieving. If he'd gone second, it was grief, because his brother fell face-up and kept less of a jaw. The gunshot shattered his mandible, wrenched his head towards the side. The left cheek absent entirely, the teeth on the opposite side visible. He wore braces. Had he still been alive, he'd have swilled the taste of blood and chewed on the remains of his tongue. On both boys, two or three rounds in their upper bodies left rough holes in their shirts. The skin under the rips hid under black holes, drying blood.

I'd never seen a cadaver outside the sterility of a coffin. It took a minute before my chest stopped heaving and I felt well enough to cautiously walk back over. "What happened?" I asked one of the men squatting next to the brothers.

"They snuck out to scout around one of the marinas not too far thataway. Came up the road and ran smack into a pack of fucking Marines. Don't know if they fired first or ran, but they made it back here before this younger one, Clifton, took a round in the leg. His brother stops, kneels near him or something. Gets caught in the chest."

"What about his jaw?"

"This isn't a goddamn crime show."

If my story, my life working for the American Reclamation and everything that happened on account me because of it, if all of those life-threads that knotted themselves around others, that came up sheared or split-ended because the things I did or didn't do were responsible—and I do feel responsible, for so much, so often—and it comes down to a single moment, it's probably that night, looking at those boys. Because I chose to walk around to the other side of that circle, to the other side where the face-down brother's arm reached between their bodies and clutched his brother's hand and I felt, god, I felt the only way I could in that moment. What do you name that feeling? Powerless, but no—because I could act. I could do something for those boys. Saddened, sure, but not just that. Angry, maybe. But really, if I'm just confessing sins here, I felt called. I was thinking about what Nick had said and what was in front of me, and I felt like I could do something positive. I could help make it so there were fewer of these boys. Everything in me became caught up, beyond reason.

I took a few pictures before I asked the man who'd been standing next to me earlier to turn off certain car lights. He deigned it, slammed each car door he entered and exited, obviously angry. I didn't understand why, but I didn't want to ask either.

I thought my work nearly done when I heard another car approaching. The militiamen reacted to this one. Not with concern. If I'd expected any reaction, it would have been that they went into the woods for cover, laying against the dirt with their weapons peeking out to follow whomever approached. Instead, the five of them formed a small mob, all watching, waiting for the car that stopped in front of them, turned off its engine and lights and just sat there for a moment. Then the driver stepped out. Boots, and black jeans first. Tall. He stepped back from the door he swung shut. His burly chest and paunchy belly gave reminded me of a cannon tipped upright, snub-nosed barrel to the sky. He had a thick neck largely hidden by a thick beard the color of dead wood, wiry and wild like a nest. The other men parted for him as he walked towards me, his back straight and head high, looking ahead with a lighthouse keeper's gaze from the lantern room.

“Who're you?”

“James Middleton,” I told him. “Nick asked me to come up here.”

“For what?”

I told him Nick's grand plan. He nodded along as I spoke. I found myself never looking him in the eye for more than a second, but his eyes never seemed to waver off their point. And when I was finished, he simply asked, “Almost finished?”

I checked my camera. Sixty photos ought to have been enough for reference but I wanted to get something done by hand before I left. “Ten more minutes, I think.”

“Fifteen, then you go home.”

“OK,” I said.

I turned back to the bodies. I thought they’d be as unsettling each time as they were the first, but I was over it. Their gruesomeness was just feature now. Part of the landscape of another absurd scene in the city I thought I’d understood. I drew for a few minutes, jotted down what surrounded me, where the bodies were, what I felt. Colors, too, shades: their skin had gone to an icy blue except splotches of rose, things like that. Things that struck me then, but what I would come to find were the things that have also stuck with me in late nightmares. Things remembered I wished forgotten.

The man who’d driven me wasn’t anywhere to be found when I finished, not until I told the most recent arrival, the one who seemed to bear deference from the others and spent the past few minutes posted up against the car nearest the ambulance to watch me. He said, “Good,” and stuck his stubby, fat fingers into his mouth and whistled. Everyone turned at the shrill note, but the man who’d driven me earlier jogged over without being signaled specifically. Beckoned as if the whistle had been a special tone just for him. “Take Mr. Middleton home,” he said.

“Sure thing, Al.”

I’d started to follow the driver when “Al” clasped his hand on my shoulder. It caught me by surprise and my knees nearly buckled. Fat fingers squeezed the ridge beneath my collarbone, and it forced me to turn halfway towards him. “You need to have that done tomorrow,” he said. “I won’t wait for it. Neither will Nicholas.” I grabbed his wrist, tight as I could, looked at the hand with a stain smeared across this hand and

fingers, dried ink, or something. Something that'd been dark and viscous. He let go. I turned on him, looked at him. His face had been scratched across the cheek a few times, and there was dirt on his face, elbows, and pants. He smelled like a shot-off firework.

“What?” he said.

I turned and started towards the car. He said something I didn't catch, but I kept walking, told him that it'd be done when it was done. He laughed. It was a deep, huffing sound. Like a wolf out of breath. I heard him tell someone else “I like him,” as I kept walking. “He'n ought to be a use.” And then he began directing the others to pick up the bodies, and from the car window I saw them put the older boy, Donald Grier, the one who had stopped to stay with his brother and died because of it, on the stretcher. His limp arm fell over the side and swung like a hanged body.

Whoever had driven me out there was gone, or maybe was one of the men loading up the bodies of the Grier brothers, but another car flashed its headlights. I slipped into the back seat. The clock in the car read near four by then. Michael Quarry leaned his hulking frame over the center console to fuss with something on the passenger side, a rifle that leaned from the foot well with its barrel pointed towards the floor. His patrol cap, which I swear he hadn't been without since he deserted Fort Bragg, slipped off his head, but he left it there. “Howdy, James. You all right tonight?”

“I've been better,” I said.

Quarry was my normal driver and one of the friendlier people I'd ever met. There seemed something wholly wrong about such a man being in a militia, or at the end of a gun even, but at the same time I would never have confused his geniality with actual

weakness. Maybe it was just a gregarious nature. Either way, I thought of him as a friend and I didn't want to offend him. But I wasn't in the mood to talk.

"I get it, man," he said. "Just so you know, we're going to take you to the studio tomorrow afternoon around two so you can do what you need for those posters. Just got told."

"That's fine," I said.

"Cool. Then I'll let you rest."

I asked if he'd mind the car's dome light left on. I told him I needed it for the work. And by the time we would pull into my apartment complex, I'd laid out notes for three designs featuring the Grier brothers. I also hoped that one of the photographs would be good enough to run on its own. But it wasn't just to work that I wanted the light on. Having that on like some bright overhead star made it more difficult to see outside and I wasn't interested in the scenery anymore, like I had been on the way out. I wasn't interested in those dark roads or those quiet nights, those unusual things. Instead, I was afraid to know what might take place amidst them.

I hoped, the next morning, that strong coffee and sunshine would shake off the unrestful sleep I'd gotten on my couch—when it wasn't interrupted by visions of the brothers' bodies—and so I stood out on my balcony in the pleasant warmth of the May morning and watched as the girl I'd gotten myself in trouble over stood in the courtyard and tended to the her aunt's garden. Beth held the watering can so a light stream fell on purple petals who shook appreciatively for the water. When she finished, she took a furtive glance towards her aunt's screen door and knelt to take one of the little bells

between her fingers. She plucked it with a quick tug, leaving enough of a long green stem that she could thread it through the buttonhole of her blouse. This new wild brooch matched the shimmer where the sun caught her black hair most fully, lavender as if from a prism.

“Your aunt’ll kill you, she catches you doing that,” I called down.

She pressed her finger across her lips.

I gestured over my shoulder towards the inside of my apartment. She nodded.

Beth had been interning at the Mint Museum during spring break, part of her training for a fulltime summer position and living with her aunt, a sour woman who’d never liked me very much and liked me even less when after her niece met me. When Beth heard about the American Reclamation moving in, she’d stayed with her aunt in the apartment, and when militiamen came knocking on doors looking for people to be sent out of the city, Ms. Gallot hid her niece in a closet. So Beth had made it through the dragnet, trapped herself inside the city.

Four heavy blows landed against my door. Then four more, these hard enough to rattle the doorknob. She could barely contain her laughter as she tried to sound intimidating: “Gestapo, open up.”

I opened the door and held my hands high in surrender. She kissed me gently on the lips.

“You’d make a shitty German,” I told her. “They don’t laugh.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” she said. “Can I come in?”

“If you want. Coffee?”

She didn't step into the apartment any further than she had though. "I saw the car last night and heard them come up here. Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I think they're trying to crack down on fake ration cards and they wanted to take a closer look at mine."

Beth looked like I'd just reminded her of some nightmare from before.

"Relax. I've told you before: I make my own, and I give you my real ones in case of emergency. I think they get suspicious because I tell them I have a family of six to feed but don't wear a wedding ring. One guy threw a box of condoms in my cart and told me to learn how to use them," I said. Beth laughed. "They get off on showing a little authority, and that's fine. You don't go shopping. You have nothing to worry about." I didn't either. I hadn't needed ration cards at all. Every week I gave half of my real ones to Beth and kept the other half as a stack for myself, tucked out of sight under my master bathroom sink. If I did need groceries, for myself or Ms. Gallot and Beth, I passed a note to Quarry or Norm who passed it along to some low-level militia member stuck with the most boring job in the revolution.

"I'm not worried about me, you idiot," she said.

"I'm fine. I want them to leave you and your aunt alone. I should just be more careful."

She looked momentarily placated, but I wasn't really talking to her. I was trying to remind myself that Nick didn't want her near me. I rationalized that it'd be more dangerous if I stopped seeing her all at once. She'd become suspicious or angry, or worst of all: curious.

“My aunt is going to wonder where I’m at. Come down to the garden with me for a bit?”

I followed her down to the courtyard. We sat at the stone table in the middle, flanked by the planters and stone benches near the four separate apartment buildings for our complex, each three stories and blue-shuttered. On a bright day, like it was, the shutters on each unit stood out as being recognizably different, mismatched shades of blue. And between those shutters, each window wore white blinds that never opened. No one in the apartments ever seemed to interact with anyone else, just like they hadn’t before. We’d handled our gripes in the back and forth of passive-aggressive notes and anonymous complaints to the landlords. Everyone did everything they could to pretend no one else lived in the complex. Except one neighbor: Tracy Gallot, who had it out for me since I’d moved in and derived some elderly pleasure from giving me the evil eye whenever we crossed paths, her pupils narrowing to slits so she looked like a hoary, squinting lizard. She was even doing it now, from behind her patio door.

“Your aunt is watching us,” I told her.

“Of course. She thinks you’re a bad influence.”

“I’m just glad someone finally thinks I’m influential at all.” I waved to her. “I actually don’t understand why she doesn’t like me.”

“You’re too old for me, to start.”

“I’m 29. What’s a little less than ten years, and at the end of the world, no less?”

Beth laughed, but I wasn’t sure what I’d said was funny. She liked when I joked about the end of the world or them blowing up the city or any manner of awful ways that

things could end. The youngest part of Beth seemed to be her backbone, still made of young mettle. No anxieties for her. She was probably already over the fact that the American Reclamation had paid me a visit last night. “Maybe if you two sat down and talked?”

“Beth, she isn’t going to like me. And she shouldn’t.”

“I wish she did. So, tell me something I don’t know about you yet.”

“This game again?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was there something you wanted to watch on television?”

“Why don’t you tell me something for once?”

“Almost feels like there’s no war on,” Beth said. She took my coffee, cradling the cup against herself before she took a long sip. Then she set it back between us, a little closer to her, and smiled as she did it.

“Almost.” And it sometimes did feel like almost nothing changed. A weak sheen of normalcy. Few places made any contact beyond the border, I-485, and the internet and cell towers were universally dark. Only people whose jobs had been deemed essential still worked. Mostly, it was doctors, nurses, paramedics. The only cars I ever heard that weren’t related to the American Reclamation (who’d claimed nearly every cop car in the city) were ambulances and firetrucks. But a few occupations that struck me as weird, they kept their hours too: grocery store clerks. Quarry told me the church not too far away had Sunday service for empty pews, though I didn’t know if he was joking with me.

And the rest of the city learned how unimportant we all were. I don’t know what people did with their new leisure time. Some of the normal things, I suppose. Went to the

grocery store and walked up and down the aisles from rightmost to left like they always did. That hadn't changed at all, other than the members of the American Reclamation who milled about and checked ration cards. Board games perhaps had their shining moment. People learned to read all over again. And, of course, the census growth will tell us that people fucked their way through boredom. All of this is to say, the city settled into a new normal and after two weeks it felt like the way things had always been. The way that when you come down with a cold and stuffy nose, you can't seem to remember what it was like to be able to breathe and you hate yourself for not actively celebrating that positive condition. In the city, people adapted and people lived.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” Beth asked.

“I don't even know how you make that decision.” I tried to do the impossible political arithmetic: if the siege lasts so many days, approval ratings for Nick and the American Reclamation fall at rate X , but the President looks weak or has disapproval ratings of level Y , when does the political capital expend itself for either side and invasion, considering the risk of C deaths and Z regional backlash and distrust that may spawn riots or violence in other cities, become the only viable alternative? Solve. “What would you do?”

“If I wasn't here, I reckon I'd have the army in by sunset,” she said.

“Too much collateral damage. Door-to-door fighting? There's already been those bro—” I caught myself and stopped. “It'd be too much. This isn't like that wildlife reserve or whatever in Oregon. There's actual people you have to consider. Lots of them.”

“So you’d just wait?”

“Or they could give in to demands. President resigns, that sort of thing.”

“Never happen,” Beth said. Which was true. I’d seen the list of demands the American Reclamation or, maybe more specifically, Nick had made. A litany of grievances and demands that each state governor had received, along with the media and the White House. Most news outlets had printed or had a news anchor read them in full. As far as I knew at the time, there had been no counterproposal, but it was unlikely to be good enough anyway. “Besides, he better not give in. Not to these assholes.”

“Did you even vote for him?” I asked.

“Couldn’t. Too young. Did you?”

“I don’t vote.”

“You suck.”

“I just don’t care. I don’t understand economic policy. I can barely do my own taxes. I don’t know the name of any of my other elected representatives. I just want to live my life in peace and see people treated fairly. And, I guess to the American Reclamation, it seems like people aren’t.”

“They’re just a bunch of racist rednecks upset Trump couldn’t run for president.”

“I liked Trump at first. I liked the whole, he says what he means thing.”

“Please shut up,” she told me. She looked like she pitied me, like I’d just told her something horribly embarrassing about myself. I guess I had, but I clarified for her: I liked that shtick until the underpinning racism became too much to ignore. Then I liked Bernie Sanders, and I might have even voted for him if he’d made it through the

primaries. After all the interesting people were out, I lost interest too. She shook her head at me and stretched her back, hooking her feet around my calves under the stone table and leaning back with her arms drawn overhead like a diving swimmer. For a minute, even after she relaxed, she kept her eyes on the sky. “Must be almost noon.”

“How do you know?”

Beth pointed. Overhead, three black dots crossed between the clouds. “Those drones. They always pass over at noon.”

They were specks with wings, the vague shape of birds. When they came back around in a wide loop, a bit lower, they looked like albatrosses lost in migration. I wondered if we on the ground ought to have thought of them of bad luck, like old sailors.

“We should go inside, then,” I said.

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

“In case what? There’s some flyby every day and nothing happens. Circle two, three times and then they disappear.

“Still,” I said. I took my coffee, cold as it would get out here, and stood. “Come inside with me?”

Beth turned and looked over her shoulder. Her aunt was still standing by the door, or had come back to chaperone us again. “No. Can I just walk you up?”

We went back, our hands coyly brushing to just let each other know we were there, that not touching wasn’t possible. At my door, I pulled her in and out of view of whomever might watch, whether through slat blinds or from the camera of a drone, and

we kissed our goodbye for a minute before I let her go. “I may walk to the store later, so if I’m not here, that’s why,” I told her. She waved from the doorway and I heard her go down the stairs and back to her aunt. “

I’ve been working on the posters since she left and it’s been maybe an hour when there’s another knock on my door, just one loud one like a warning shot, before a key rasps inside the lock. Norm pushed the door open with his shoulder, following its slow arc. He had a pistol in his left hand.

“Anyone home?”

“Hey there,” I said from the couch.

Norm went straight to the back of the apartment. He called back, “Just you, James? I heard you like to have company.”

“Don’t know who told you that,” I told him, but I still heard him rummaging through my shit, making a mess for me to clean up later. He came back into the living room with a smile on his stupid face, liver-spotted and tan and obnoxious. He had wiry limbs and a potbelly. It looked as if God had intended Norm to be tall but substituted whatever was leftover. I heard he was an insurance actuary and an Oathkeeper, but he’d been kicked out and joined some other group before he ended up here, where I knew him only as a Grade A asshole who bragged about his gun collection and took pride in his bad manners. He and Quarry could not have been more different, and I got the impression that he was there simply to enforce some meanness on my world. “Shall we go?”

He nodded, nudging my shoulder as he passed.

The red Audi I usually rode in looked like the chandelier from a paranoid delusion. Overtop the aluminum foil like silver leopard spots, on the arc of the roof and along the doors and trunk the cars wore large, jagged shards of glass and cast wide, shifting glares as the sun shot off the broken pieces of the half-dozen large mirrors glued or tied or bolted to each body panel. The kaleidoscopic reflection of the world in the unpredictable reflections made it disorienting to look at. A ripple-echo of the world. I approached the passenger side and watched the insectival view of myself in the hundred parts of this weird compound eye. And I shielded my eyes until I was in. The roof was blinding, which was the intent: covering the cars with mirrors provided faster identification of American Reclamation cars and it helped camouflage the cars from observing aircraft.

“Hey Mike,” I said. “How’s it?”

“Living the dream.” Quarry was leaning over towards the passenger’s side of the dashboard, changing the Post-It note that he used to keep track of how many days it had been. It was almost time for him to change the tens place again. He took off his patrol cap to rub his head.

“Hair’s getting long, Quarry. They’d shave you like a sheep if you were still at Bragg.”

“Fucking right they would,” he laughed.

Norm got in. “Let’s go.”

“Radio?” I asked.

“It’s patchy, but we can try.”

AM and FM were government propaganda during the day and dead, static, and white noise all night, but there was one station that came through sometimes, if the wind blew the right way. The nasally voice from a commercial played, and then some snippet of a theme song for the news talk station. After two weeks I was just as happy when the radio was static as this talk show played. All it seemed to do was leave me nostalgic for the days when I listened fifteen seconds at a time as I flipped through stations for a tolerable song to drive home to.

The host's elastic voice came back: "Well, look—look, the fact of the matter is that only 35 percent of Americans are absolutely sure they want direct intervention. Thirty-five percent is not the sort of numbers you go to war with."

"We're not talking about war."

"That's exactly what we're talking about. Military action on United States soil. And there isn't the will there."

"I think you could..." and we lost the station and whatever the guest thought.

"I guess 35 percent is higher than Nick likes?" I asked.

"I couldn't say," Quarry said.

"Norm?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know shit about it."

"I am shocked, just shocked by that," I said. Norm turned slightly towards the backseat but let it go. And I was already thinking about something else/ The Grier Brothers would change the tone. Right now, things were OK. The government was going to try not to do what it had done at Waco and Ruby Ridge, and instead do what it'd done

in Oregon, which had worked just fine for the most part. But eventually, they would change the Rules of Engagement. Things would go to some sort of “by any means necessary.” The Grier Brothers could rally the public, turn it to a demand from We the People: no bloodshed. It might even allow for negotiation. “Well, I’ll figure it out. Don’t you boys worry,” I said.

“We weren’t,” Quarry muttered. He wove the Audi through the streets, past where there should have been people out to enjoy the spring day. He pulled up to the curb at the studio. As I got out, I looked up at a cloudless patch of sky and saw something, a drone or plane. An inverse star. The only spot in the sky.

The office I had claimed as a workspace looked larger with three of its walls bare. On the one where I most wished there to be a window, I’d hung the posters I’d done so far. Three lamps lit the room brightly. An easel and a loveseat with ripped cushions anchored either side of the room and a flat drafting table spanned between them with a surprisingly ergonomic chair behind it. The wastebasket near the wall belched drafts and wasted paper. The computers I’d brought in, two powerful PCs and a Mac, all let off a low hum as they slept.

Even with the designs I had from last night, I took some time before I started on the real work. I drew whatever ran through my head, robots and mermaids on the page corners, Ms. Gallot’s flowers. Just for twenty minutes before my work actually might have meant something. And while I liked propaganda, the idea of having real purpose beyond the commercial for my art felt unusual. I’d always been capitalistic in a vulgar sense. Whereas my other friends had gone on to do shows, sometimes experimental or

political or timely enough to pick up a middle of the hour, two-minute report on the local news, I just worked for clients. My biggest thought for how art could change the world was the crush I got on Rosie the Riveter the first time I saw her, at thirteen in a history class. In that way, propaganda seemed so unlike what I was doing, which is why I had studied it. And although I knew there was propaganda in the world, unless it was an attack ad, I didn't see it as being influential. I was the artist my friends, at parties in studios and lofts with cheap wine and a lot of pot, would have accused of selling out if I had ever claimed a shred of credibility in the first place.

There was no way to finish the posters in just a couple hours, but I got enough down by the time that Norm slammed his liver-spotted hand on the door and told me to pack up, I was all ready to work from home for the evening. I uploaded everything I'd done to a jumpdrive and stuck what I'd done by hand in a portfolio case that I slid to the other side of the backseat as got in. The car ride started out unusually quiet, and I felt uncomfortable by the silence. Not that there were many deep conversations between the three of us, but usually Quarry and I spoke a little bit, told stories about life three weeks ago, when things were normal. But the car was unpleasantly dour.

“So, mom, dad, school was great today,” I said.

“Shut up, James,” said Norm.

“That ain't fair to him. Just because you don't like the decis...”

Norm cut off Quarry: “Make sure you take Woodlawn.”

“I got it,” Quarry said. He turned down into a neighborhood and turned back around.

There was another unpleasant silence.

“Just tell me what’s up,” I said.

“Nick wants to see you at a meeting tomorrow.”

“Again?”

“No,” Quarry said, looking up into the rearview mirror to make sure we made eye contact before he continued, “No, a real meeting. Members of the American Reclamation. You’re going to bring all the work you have on those boys, and anything else you’ve been working on. It’s gonna be most of the committee leadership.”

“I have posters back there that I should get then,” I said.

“Norm and I will get them. We’re going to drop you off. But look,” Quarry slowed the car at a corner. “See that building up there?” He didn’t even point. He meant a small store up ahead that only sold overpriced and bad beer, a liquor store that couldn’t sell liquor. “You walk there, by yourself.”

“Now?” I asked. I had my hand on the door to get out.

“No. Tomorrow night at eight, after sunset. You wait inside the building and someone will come pick you up.”

“Don’t tell anyone where you’re going,” said Norm. “Nobody.”

“OK,” I said. “No problem.”

“Good. You got an invite to the table, James. Don’t go fucking it up,” Quarry said. He stomped on the gas pedal and the car rocketed off down the road, windows down and the breeze pleasant and heavy until he stopped at the entrance to my apartment, not in front of the building. I walked down as they pulled off down the road again.

Beth usually didn't come up in the evenings. Her aunt kept the leash shorter then, perhaps more afraid of lasciviousness after dark. That gave me time to work and by the time I made dinner, I had two posters finished, plus one of the photos touched up. The work distracted me from the content for a while. I was able to put out of my head what I was looking at. But it did catch up to me eventually, so I took a break and made dinner, a nice steak. It was probably something better than what I would have bought myself and it got me curious, so I stepped on the scale in the bathroom. I'd lost three pounds during the siege. Was I eating better in occupation than I had been fending for myself?

Regardless, the momentum to work on the posters of the Grier Brothers never came back. I kept wondering more about how they died. Who had shot them? How did that person feel? Were they aware that they'd killed two brothers? I thought they must have been for the last question. After all, it'd certainly looked like the older one had stopped to stay with his brother and gotten killed because of it. And I wondered what the older brother thought, stopping like that, but thinking that too long got to me, gave me a sharp contraction in the chest, like catching something unexpected behind you in a foggy mirror. I put everything away, then. Went to bed, and the next morning I went down to see Beth in the garden because I didn't want to look at the posters anymore or think about the brothers. Again, I hadn't slept very well and the thought of going to this meeting gave me the sensation of my stomach dropping out.

Beth was excited to tell me about the previous afternoon, when she'd been taking out the trash and bumped into a woman who lived in one of the other buildings. The woman had looked upset, Beth said, so she'd asked what was wrong. "And apparently

they'd taken more of her ration cards than they should have. Like, a lot more. And when she complained, they told her could buy some back. With cash."

"I'm not surprised," I told her.

"Have you had to pay a bribe?"

"Me?" I paused, remembering that I was supposedly making frequent trips to the grocery stores in our area. "Once or twice."

In the car, some day last week, Norm and Quarry had argued about bribery. Quarry thought it was unacceptable, a show of corruption on the purity of their ideals. He could be a bit overly pious with his sense of fairness sometimes, talked about the American Reclamation like some grand salvation, a reawakening. Norm told him, and me, that it was just capitalism working itself out. I thought he misunderstood capitalism, but I didn't tell him that. People who needed charity, Norm promised, would get charity. Neighbors would help neighbors. And that was the way it should be, a sense of true conservatism expressed by the bigness of their hearts when others were in need. I didn't agree, but had to concede a point: from the outset I'd helped the Gallot family. And as Beth told the story of this woman she'd met, she'd helped too: she'd gotten some of her emergency ration cards—"Just a few, I didn't want her to think I could do this all the time," Beth said—and gave them to the woman. And Beth said, "I felt good about it, but what would happen if I hadn't been there? Would her boys have gone hungry?"

"Maybe," I said.

"I bet she'd have starved herself dead before her sons missed a meal," Beth said. "She looked like someone who'd do that." She looked in the direction that apartment,

focusing for a long moment as if trying to see inside with some special vision. Trying to make sense of that future. “But the most interesting thing Lisa—that’s her name, if you’ve never met her—the most interesting thing Lisa said was, ‘Just a few more days, right?’ And I said yes, but I don’t know. It kind of feels like everyone thinks all we have to do is hold out, like the army will be here tomorrow or the day after. Like, soon, however you look at it. But I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I told her. “One day at a time.”

“Well, how can I make any long term plans here anyway?” she asked.

She looked upset, and I told her that.

“I’m fine. Hey, want to play a game?”

“I don’t think I have anything else to tell you that you don’t already know about me,” I said.

“No, like cards or something. My aunt has a deck.”

“Not now,” I said.

“Can you draw me something?” She reached out and took hold of my hand, tilting her head and batting her eyelashes at me like the flirty girl in some afterschool special.

“Please.”

I asked her, after I’d gotten a sketchbook and pencil, what I was drawing.

“I was thinking about getting a tattoo,” she said.

“You know where we are, right? I couldn’t get you stickers, much less a tattoo.”

“I just want you to draw it for me now, so I’ll have it.”

“Fine. What?”

“Surprise me. Give it to me when things are over.”

“Christ, Beth.”

But I did draw, though not something for a tattoo. I drew her, the way she looked at me then, her gray eyes sometimes glancing over my shoulder and focusing for a moment on what was behind her, some sparrows crawling into the dryer vents where they'd nested. She looked down at the picture, smiled. Shook her head at me as if what I'd done was some silly thing. We sat out there for a while until Ms. Gallot opened her patio door and called for Beth.

“Get in here. I need help with something,” she said.

“What?” Beth asked.

“Just come help.”

Beth kissed me on the top of the head before she left. I knew the affection to be not at all for me, but it wasn't hard to make peace with that. “See you later,” I said. She nodded, went inside. But I stayed for a bit, still working on the drawing. I caught someone looking through the blinds from one of the other apartment buildings. The slats shook as whoever slid them aside to watch me let them go. Probably some kid. But then it happened again just a few minutes later. At that I packed up my things and went inside, laying around—away from the windows, with the door deadbolted—until dusk.

And the walk to the meeting place felt almost normal. I felt like part of the city, part of the city that never left or was never conquered. In the car, I was removed. Isolated, as if the mirror shards reflected more than the eyes of drones. The world went with it. Walking with a backpack and my portfolio case, it wasn't something I'd have

normally done...but I could have done it. The rules of moving on my feet as the sunset over the treetops and buildings remained fundamentally the same. As I cut through a cul-de-sac, people meandered outside, never far from their homes or yards. Close enough that if I had done anything more than nod, they could disappear into back into their houses before a wave, or “Hello” left my lips. They’d be gone at the opening of my mouth. Their kids, all kids, were absent. A few held the slack lines of their dogs’ leashes. The dogs must have smelt some sort of primal change, a return to baser instincts. Instead of panting, wagging tails, they bristled; their owners never returned my waves. They just watched.

That evening, the hazy sky darkened slowly. The low neon blue fought against giving way to orange marred by clouds in long purple streaks like blown-out veins, rutted trenches. I crossed over Woodlawn and came to the store. Tiles hung off one side of the roof as if part of a slow descent, sloughing off. I thought it amazing that the buildings would deteriorate so quickly, but then realized that they’d been replacing the roof before. Everything in the city had stopped, but it wasn’t, on its own, apocalyptic.

The windows, though, were broken. No one mentioned any looting. I wondered if anyone was hurt, and how many, since the number was almost certainly greater than zero. I didn’t imagine shopkeepers letting looters take goods, and I didn’t imagine looters from being dissuaded with all the disorganization of the first few days.

I stepped in through the broken window, careful to go over the jagged shards of glass. Inside was wrecked. Bottles broken across the tile crunched under my feet and in the absence of glass, the tile floor grabbed at my feet with the sticky residue, probably

from the box of Corona that looked like it'd been thrown against the ground. A few other bottles towards the back had met the same fate. A ripe, sweet smell filled the store. I walked further back, towards the thick door with an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign. The handle had been broken off and then removed entirely, its scraps on the floor, so I had to fishhook two fingers through the hole and tug the door open. Inside, a few chairs rested upside-down. More broken bottles, glass. A safe in the corner had been open and largely emptied. I took a couple steps in, overwhelmed by the debris. And as I turned back to head out front and wait, I saw six neat dots in the wall next to the door. The white stucco splotched and then trailed down red where whomever had been shot bled and then slowly slid down the wall to collapse. I slipped out of the office as quick as I could, back to the fresh air.

I checked my watch. Ten minutes to wait.

It was a long ten minutes, my heart sometimes thudding against my chest when things became too quiet. And then, right on time, a truck raced down the road and squealed as the driver slammed on the breaks, leaving long skid marks. A man on the far side of the car opened the door and stood on the running boards, leaning an assault rifle on the roof of the car, that pinprick hole in the barrel aimed at me. My eyes focused on it, the way the blackness inside of it seemed to go on forever.

Another man got out and searched me, then pushed me with a fat hand on my back. "Come'n, get in."

The car sped towards Uptown. We cut up the wrong direction of a road, and then something went over my head, engulfing me in darkness. As we crisscrossed the city, I

started to tell the men in the car what I'd seen in the store, but my voice was too muffled by the sack that smelled like mothballs and clung to my lips. They pulled it up to free just my lips and the tip of my nose, and I greedily sucked up the fresh air in a few quick breaths. "Someone had been shot in that store. There was blood and bullet holes," I told them. "Maybe a looter or the owner or something."

"We'll send someone to look into it," said someone up front. "Thanks for telling us."

We stopped. I moved to get out, but someone forced me back down with a sharp pull on my arm. The car idled for what seemed like ages. Then another car honked. We sped off, and a few minutes later, the engine crescendoed in the narrow echoes of a parking garage.

"Out."

I shambled forward under the hood, sometimes directed by the rough suggestion from whoever had wound their fist in the shoulder of my shirt and clenched it tightly, pushing me along. Push to go forward, pull to slow down. He wanted me to change directions once and nearly toppled me over as my feet tangled themselves. We paused, waited for the chime of an elevator. I felt boxed in as two men squeezed into my space. Just from the breathing sounds, one of them like a panting dog, I figured there must have been five of us in the elevator at least.

Seventh floor, the elevator said.

I was pulled out. Someone commented on their dislike of the décor. We went down a hallway, stopped again while someone knocked a rhythmic pattern on the door. It

was vaguely familiar, a song. A little more dragging on my shirtfront to get me seated and some gentleman pushed my chair in for me. Then, they took the hood off and I blinked at the bright lights. We were in a large room, windowless and seemingly held down by an immense elliptical conference table. With two on either side of the doors and another six spaced almost evenly along the room, American Reclamation members stood with rifles pointed towards the blue-carpeted floor. The seats at the table were nearly full. Most had to be 40+: a lot nearing gray hair or poorly hiding it, their roots showing because they hadn't dyed it recently, their hands resting on guts or cradling plump chins and fat cheeks as their elbows leaned on the table. Two women, both blonde with their hair pulled back, sat across from me and shared a bag of chips, and another sat a bit further down the table, writing something on a legal pad.

“Wanna drink?” asked a teenager who'd come up behind me. There was already water on the table.

“I'm fine,” I said.

Someone else asked for a Jack and Coke.

Nick came in with two other men. I almost didn't recognize the second: it was the man who'd gotten out of the car while I'd been photographing the Grier boys, Al. He'd shaven, revealing his cherry skin dewlap, red as a rooster's wattle. The hair was neater too, and he wore a white polo and khakis.

“Good to see you again, James,” he said as he sat down towards the end of the table.

“Good to s—” I was interrupted by heavy knocking on the door. Not rhythmic, just beating with a heavy fist.

“What’s the key?” Al shouted. He slid his hand around his back, crouching off the seat of his chair.

“Motherfucker, I don’t know how to knock ‘Dixie.’ Just let me in.”

Everyone looked at Al, who checked with Nick. Both nodded. The door opened, and a wiry man wearing bottlecap lenses shoved his way past one of the guards standing near. He came up to Al and hugged him. “Good to see you, brother.”

“Sit down, Calvin. Let’s get started?” Al asked.

“To order,” Nick said.

And with that began my first meeting with the American Reclamation.

CHAPTER TWO

They started with discussing the weather.

It was supposed to rain tomorrow, more next week and it was going to get worse throughout the spring the way it did, with those clear mornings and late afternoon deluges, and what would that mean for them? The woman with the legal pad said that most of their outposts featured coverings. Drainage near Wilkson, right about I-277 could be a problem. “It might interfere with the west quadrant’s food and medicine shipment if we’ve got to take people out of their homes.”

“We got some boys we can move to help out,” said one of the men on the other side of the room.

“They ought’n run with some rounds in case they try something.”

“They won’t try anything, not with after they killed the Grier brothers,” Al said.

“You think?” someone asked.

“Well,” Nick gestured at me. “I reckon that’ll be up to James here. Now, let me say: James Middleton is a friend of mine. We go back to my days in law school. There’s no one I would trust more to put our message out there.”

I realized I wasn’t sitting with my portfolio. I looked around in a panic, then at Nick. I realized I didn’t know what would happen if I didn’t have the work to show. “My, um....”

The boy who’d offered me a drink earlier slid my case in front of me. “Here.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I flipped it open. I went into client-presentation mode, that one where a mix of art talk and client-focused bullshit came out of my mouth without much thought. “There’s a couple different approaches here. You can just run the graphic photo. That’s going to be great for media. They get to slap a disclaimer that it might not be suitable for kids, and local news loves that. You overlay some text, like I did here,” I flipped off the photograph to another print. “And what you get is something people could share on social media. Twitter’ll go nuts. It’s easily viral.”

“Hell, I could have done that,” said the man who couldn’t knock “Dixie.” He stroked a divot in the curve of his ear, as if part of the lobe had been clipped away.

“Maybe,” I said. “Here’s the other pieces though.” I flipped again. “If your end goal is to stop the military from coming in, that’s different than recruiting. I know you probably want more people to protest or get involved, but you also have to make sure that they’re repulsed by what intervention means.” I slid the artwork out of its sleeve so they could pass it around. “You need them to think of quagmires. There’s a reason that they don’t let the press take photos at Dover, where they bring dead troops home.” And that was how it had to work: a siege enforced by politics and circumstance. Everyone knew someone, or knew someone who knew someone, in the city or involved its occupation or entrapment. Long lines of family and relationships could reinforce the borders as well as fences and guns. As soon as the Grier brothers hit the front page no one would tolerate open violence. No one wanted to see dead Americans on American soil killed by American soldiers. It wasn’t like a school shooting where there was one psychopathic face to look at over and over again, where the pictures of the scene were withheld to

protect the integrity of the victims in their last moments. And it wouldn't be like black bodies that'd crossed paths with police where the loud subsets of the population shouted at each other and white, middleclass people looked at the newspaper and thought, "That's a shame" before they went on with their day. These boys were white and were middleclass. They died violently. They died alone. They died with an emotional narrative. They checked all the boxes for an instant national tragedy.

"Can you put them all out?" asked Nick.

I took them all from their sleeves and arranged them on the table like war room maps. Everyone stood, pointed at them and talked among themselves. I'd lost the room, but people kept asking me questions.

"You can mass produce these?"

"Easily. Plenty of printers in the city that no one is using."

"And you're going to do more for us?" asked Al.

I looked at Nick. He nodded, smiling slightly. "Sure," I said.

"Can I suggest something?"

"We need to roll these out tonight, Emmett," said Nick. "I've already got couriers waiting."

"No, no. It ain't that. I got an idea for another one."

"Shoot," I said.

Emmet leaned forward, his paunch getting a reprieve from gravity as it rested on the table. "You think you could do something about that nigger Tavish?"

I'd never heard the word dropped so casually in my life. I looked down at the posters.

"All I figure is that nigger is half the reason some of us are in this shit. I watched Billy Sunter every night. Even met him once. And that son of a bitch shot him, right there on the TV. You take that, you do something with him."

"James can do it. I agree with you, he has to be part of what we do," Nick said to Emmet.

"Well," I looked at Nick, who'd turned towards me. His face was blank as new canvas. I had never heard him say anything about race. He'd been accused once, not long after his election, of some dog whistle remarks on affirmative action. But I thought this was him talking too much, poor phrasing. You have to be so careful with what you say now. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Something that treats him like he is," Elliot said. "You look like you don't understand what I mean."

"No, no. Just thinking is all," I said. And I was. Did he want Strothmann and his Huns? Or King Kong molesting Lady Liberty, like Harry Hopp had done? "I'm sure I can come up with an angle."

"What do you mean, angle? You don't talk straight, do you? Words coming out both sides of your mouth."

"Elliot," Nick said, holding up a hand to calm him.

"He isn't like us."

“Oh, fuck off, Elliot,” said one of the women, holding the bag of potato chips out for her friend to take while she spoke. “We ain’t all like you. Calling every black person you see nigger like you still want to own them. Some of us are here because of what they pulled at the convention with Trump.”

“You go to hell, Sally Howard.”

“You first.”

People started to talk over one another. Little arguments broke out over the room, but no one was speaking to me anymore. I just watched, my head swiveling back and forth between the chatter. It rose and rose to a din that stopped me from being able to hear any one exchange distinctly and then stopped suddenly as a loud crack sounded from one end of the table where Al had taken a walking stick propped in the corner of the room and rapped it against the table so hard it splintered. A glass of water on one side tipped and water ran towards the artwork, but I managed to snatch it up just before it wetted the edge of one piece. “That’s a fucking ‘nough,” Al barked. He had the voice of God for the moment. “Get your shit right. James, I’m sorry. You have anything else to say?”

“I can do more. You guys can get your ideas to me, but I don’t promise anything. And you can’t just run stuff like this over and over again, especially inside the city. And you are going to want propaganda, or messaging, if you want to call it that, in the city.”

“Why can’t we just do that?” Nick asked.

“No state can just run antagonistic propaganda. If you’ve got to rile people up, you do it by showing the threat. But angry people are aimless. You ever done anything productive when you’re angry? Not usually, right? You have to give people a vision.

You're going to need something positive. And in the city, where everyone sees your people every day, that's another thing. There needs to be a counterweight, a positive balance. How people move forward, show life can be better your way."

"We've got an authoritarian standing army led by a leftie in the White House who's never served and wants to take our freedom," said Al. "They should be angry."

"He's right, James," said Nick. "And I know everyone here will agree when I say this isn't the vision we have for this city or country. This is the means to an end."

"You don't need to sell them that this is a utopia already. You just need to show them something that can be realized. You need a positive face, and," For a minute, it felt as if I'd been shocked by my sudden idea. "Literally a face. That's what you need."

"How about Alvin, there?" Elliot patted the table. "You could be famous. You'd look good on a poster." The rest of the group laughed, but Al didn't. He didn't even smile.

"You mean Congressman Brewer. South Carolina golden boy, already named in the press."

"Could work," I said. Could, would. Nick had won his congressional election in a landslide both terms. He led the stories for a month when he quit the House. How many of the people in the city, standing out there in the dark with their guns and their cause, tucked along the borders and checkpoints and hideouts, were there for him, because of him? And wasn't I, too? Wasn't I proof?

The door opened without anyone knocking and some of the men made quick clutches at their backs and sides as if struck by sudden pain, reaching for their guns. A

young boy, fourteen if that, called for Alvin. “They told me to say it’s about Lake Norman.”

Al got up and walked out in a hurry. With him gone, Nick asked me to wait in an anteroom while they finished the meeting. It was maybe an hour before he came and sat down across from me, setting a pint of whiskey and two glasses on the low table between us. “I’m going to sit for a portrait for you?”

“Yeah. And if you aren’t perfectly still, I’m gonna be pissy.”

“What else is new?” he said.

“No, you won’t need to sit. I just need to grab a picture or two. So what now?”

“We are in getting the route together for you to go back home. People leave in a particular order. It’s in case of drone strike.”

“Is that something I should be worried about?” I asked as I opened the liquor and gave myself a large pour.

“No. Any time we do a big meeting we stock the building with civilians. I have about five minutes before they come to get me, so I wanted to check on you. Those pictures,” Nick took the bottle and drank straight from it, then continued, “I wasn’t expecting that. But they like you in there. A lot. I’m glad you are helping.”

I meant to tell him that I still wasn’t one hundred percent convinced, but instead I drank.

Al came in. He looked a little out of breath and held a handkerchief to his knuckles, patting them down as he stood near the table. “You do good work,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“But I still don’t think you understand everything right yet. Do you mind if I send you somewhere like he did?”

“Al,” Nick said. He turned his head up towards the other man, furrowed his brow.

“I’m going to have Norm take you out to see the line. I think it’ll help you see things clearer. Get you in a good headspace before you work on some more art. You need to understand what’s at stake, right?”

“Can I not go with Norm?” I asked. “We don’t see eye-to-eye.”

“Quarry will be fine,” Nick said. “Not tomorrow. We’ll give you a few days. I want to see how those posters do when they’re all over the country.”

“OK,” I said.

“Good. Congressman, we should go,” said Al.

“When it comes to security, you’re the boss.” Nick rose and buttoned his blazer. “Have a good night, James.” He took a step towards the door, then turned back. “Oh, and there’s more liquor in that cabinet behind you. You might want to drink up. You’re going to be the last to leave. Sorry.”

He left, and I waited. I finished my drink. Over the next hour, a few people came by and spoke to me, asked me questions about myself, but generally I sat there, alone. Well, not alone: I did continue to drink. And as people came up to talk, a weird (and possibly distorted) picture of the American Reclamation began to take shape for me. They talked about wanting to kill, imprison, and impeach the president and couldn’t decide which was most appropriate; they told me which groups they were affiliated with—from Oathkeepers to hate groups like the Klan—and why the other groups didn’t

know what they were doing, or how they got to the city. They told me about stumping for Donald Trump, protesting outside the brokered convention, or having been Tea Party members sick of the establishment. Their dysfunction, it bewildered me. It was hard to reconcile. But it contrasted with an awesome methodicalness when it came to matters of security. They never gave me a full picture of the sort of underground networking that had allowed so many of them to come to the city without fully tipping off the government, or the sort of misdirection that went into having the FBI both underestimating the size and preparing for the American Reclamation to take Atlanta or Oklahoma City. But they all spoke with reservation befitting the dead, their secrets kept with the knowledge that they might end up that way if they spoke too much or, for some, at all. And while they didn't talk and asked me about myself, I got a little too drunk. When one of them, the girl with the notepad, told me it was my time to go, I pounded the last of some gin that scorched my body, my body like a tree and split by clean lightning as it went down, my trunk aflame I coughed and followed her, swaying and leaning against the walls for support on my way to the elevator. They didn't even bother to blindfold me, and I fell asleep, or passed out, in the car. Like a feverdream, sometimes I snapped awake for thirty seconds of lucidity. Once they were talking about my work. I found that pleasant and slipped back into darkness with a smile screwed on my face. The next time, they were talking about the Grier Brothers, the driver talking about how he'd come back with Alvin the second time, this time bringing everybody with him so they could see. "And then we called in," he said, and he must have gone on, but my consciousness didn't.

They couldn't drop me at the same place. I'd never have made it home. Instead, they let me out at my apartment. I staggered in, but instead of going straight to bed I went downstairs, careful not to fall and crack my head. The only thing keeping my upright against the unnatural tilt of my drunken earth was the doorframe I leaned against, swaying as I banged on the door. I heard someone on the other side, so I whispered for Beth. She swung the door open so fast a squall followed and I almost fell in its wake.

“What are you doing?”

“Come upstairs with me,” I slurred.

“Do you know what time it is?”

I chuckled. It must have sounded maniacal. “No.”

“Come on. Let's go.” She tucked her head under my arm and helped me upstairs. She tried the door, but it was locked. “Keys?”

I sobered up for a second, long enough to unlock the door on my own and tug her into the living room, stumbling as I went towards the couch and tugging her with me. I kissed her. She laughed.

“You're wasted.”

“No'm,” I said. I touched a finger to the tip of her nose, I think. “I'm fine.”

And then I passed out again.

The next morning the door to the apartment was gone and I panicked until my brain caught up and remembered that, largely, doors open, they don't vanish, and that the smell in my apartment was coffee, which shouldn't have been able to happen either unless I'd somnambulated, and done so with a generous mind to my future self at that. I

heard Beth running the sink. That bitter roast smelled wonderfully to whatever homunculi played cymbals at my temples. My legs wobbled when I stood and I felt nauseous, green.

“Easy there,” Beth said. “You had a bad night.” She walked over and opened the patio door a crack. It was raining. The water splattered against the courtyard stone.

“I’m OK.”

“Good.”

I went over and poured coffee, stood looking out the window over the sink. Beth came up behind me and snaked an arm around me. I watched a trifecta of droplets race down the panes, weaving over the slightness of our reflections and stitching a pattern with their wakes. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’d have been cute if it wasn’t two in the morning.”

“Did you stay here?”

“Are you kidding? No. I just took your keys.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Where’d you get the booze, by the way? You’ve only had like two beers in your fridge for a week.”

“Bribed a guy at the store.”

“And you drank it all? Couldn’t save me any?”

I took the coffee and took a long sip. “It was very expensive. How’s your aunt?”

“OK. I bumped into Lisa again and she said that what Terrance left might be able to help out.”

I knew Terrance. I'd met him a few times when he was out walking his tawny little Yorkie, Marmaduke. He was the one who had told me that Tracy Gallot was not nearly as healthy as I thought she was, which I felt bad for when I considered how much energy she wasted on being angry with me. She had cancer and had a couple of diabetic crises in the past few years. Terrance said he thought she'd lose her foot in the next year or two if she didn't get things under control. Her kidneys were already damaged. And so even before the siege Ms. Gallot had felt like she was beginning some last hill, slowly on her way out. What she did in the garden, it was her doing what she could. Beth helped her with her diet. Terrance's own diabetes must have been why he'd gotten pushed out of the city. I didn't think he worked for the government, though he might have.

"So do we need to go get it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do we need to go into Terrance's and get it?" I asked again.

"Like, how?"

"I don't know how to get a key, but he lives on the first floor. Shouldn't be hard.

Let me shower, then we'll do it."

After I dried off and got dressed, I went out to my car and found the pair of work gloves my father had insisted I keep in my trunk. I also took a wrench I'd never used. It looked the one on the cards from Clue. And from the walkway leading up to my building I took a loose brick. Beth met me around back, near Terrance's window.

"I wouldn't ask you to come if I didn't need you to tell me we got the right thing,"

I told her.

“It’s fine.”

I smashed the window to his patio door with the wrench and reached through carefully.

The stench that wafted out was horrific. I threw up as soon as it hit me. Beth gagged but kept it together. She tucked her shirt over her nose.

“I don’t know if I can go in there,” I told her.

“You’ll stop smelling it in a bit,” she said.

“No, I don’t think I will.”

“Hold on.” Beth jogged back over to her aunt’s apartment. She was gone for a few minutes, during which time I puked again, splattering the patio stones, and then handed me a dust mask when she returned. “Put it on.”

I did. It smelled like perfume. She must have sprayed it with what she sometimes wore.

Beth reached through and unlocked the door.

Marmaduke had been shitting up against the door, obedient to a fault. Now, with the broken glass atop it, the poop seemed to shimmer. He’d also been puking up whatever he’d been eating, which seemed like whatever he could find in Terrance’s absence. Cushions from the kitchen chairs laid shredded on the floor. Same with an assortment of papers, the newspaper and mail.

“Insulin would be in the fridge,” Beth said, stepping over the pile. “Can you go check the bathroom? Just look for anything that’s testing supplies, pens, anything that says anything related to blood sugar.”

I saw Marmaduke first. I don't know whether he'd starved or was poisoned, but either way the little Yorkie was very much dead and rotting, roaches already starting to eat at the soft tissue between the pads of his paws. I gagged as I moved closer, nudged the carcass with my foot. The bugs scattered for darker recesses. There wasn't a way to hide it before Beth saw it, and when she I heard her slam her fist against the wall. I just stood there, looking at the thing, but she found a trash bag under the kitchen sink and a towel in the hall closet. She cocooned the dog in the towel and slid it into the bag I held open.

"We'll bury him later," she said.

I shook my head.

"Fine. I'll do it."

"Dumpster."

"We're not doing that."

"You know how much work it's going to take to dig a hole big enough for that dog? And where would we do it?"

She looked at the bag. "I'm doing it anyway." She tied off the bag and went to the kitchen again. I heard the water running for a long time. She must have scrubbed her hands nearly raw, trying to get whatever off her—the stench of death, the bacteria, the anger, the disappointment. Everything that rotted onto her hands.

I walked through to the bedroom and checked the master bath first. There wasn't anything but a box of test strips, so I took those out and set them on the table. Beth followed me back and checked the guest bathroom but came up empty. Then she dug through the drawers of his dresser and nightstand. I stood and watched until she asked me

to take a small armful of boxes. “Not bad,” she said. She took a some sort of cooler from the fridge.

“We should close that up before we go,” Beth said.

“It’ll be fine.”

“If people see it’s broken, they might try looking for other places to break into. Just get some cling wrap. I’ll do it. Take this stuff, put it out on the table.”

I did, and when she was finished she took everything we’d found to her aunt’s apartment and told me that she would need to explain this to her aunt, that she’d meet me upstairs in a little while. And when she knocked on the door an hour later, she seemed upset. I brought her inside, offered to make her something to eat, but she went to the couch and sat down.

“We just broke into someone’s home,” she said.

“Terrance wouldn’t mind.”

“It’s not funny, James. Look what we just did.”

“The ends justified the means. Your aunt will get the medicine she needs. Wasn’t it your idea?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“OK,” I said. “Chill.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey,” I said, walking over to her and putting a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to let you see things another way. We didn’t hurt anyone. We didn’t do

anything wrong. We took something that would have spoiled, that I'm sure Terrance would never have gotten around to using, considering he's god knows where. It's OK."

"It doesn't feel like it is," Beth said. "I need a drink."

"I don't have anything."

"Just water is fine, James," she said. She went to the kitchen and shoved a glass under the sink. I came up behind her and put my arms around her. The water overflowed and ran over her hands, but she didn't turn it off. We were both staring out the window at the entrapped courtyard and the stacked brick apartments with their drawn blinds and shut windows all together portending what we both knew, that if we opened the door to the patio we'd meet the same silence, broken only perhaps by the unaffected calls from unaffected nests of bold spring birds, sparrows that I suddenly wondered about: what were they doing in our loss, our besiegement, our empty streets overhung by the untrimmed trees that spanned narrow and lonely roads and the overgrowing green, low vines that crept from their planter boxes and snaked along the ground and up fences? Did they, did the deer whom sometimes precariously wandered through such busy streets and managed to stay hidden like passed note, like quiet spies as they passed under those overgrowing trees, did the foxes, box turtles, fish, strays all understand our sudden entrapment?

*

The next few days, I worked on the posters that people had suggested to me at the meeting. I found in interesting work, though it seemed less than rewarding. Without knowing how my posters on the Grier brothers had faired, I was guessing at whether or

not these were worth anything, and I was also aware the whole time that they could suddenly be rendered moot if the military decided to swing in and overtake the city. And when I wasn't working on the posters, I had Beth.

And then, early in the afternoon, a soft knocking on my door startled me. I went to the peephole. Quarry stood on the other side, stretching his arms and looking back and forth. He jumped a bit when I swung the door open.

"Come on in," I said.

"No time. We're going out. Time for our field trip," he said.

I went around to the passenger side. On the seat, a stack of newspapers six inches high waited for me. They all carried either a poster or the picture of the Grier brothers on the front page. On the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* there were polls and pie charts. Seventy-seven percent of Americans against intervention. Up fifteen points from the week before. Articles and opinion pieces called for the White House to open negotiations, for investigations, for every action but militarily breaking the siege.

"Nice work," Quarry said.

"Can't believe it."

"It's all you, James," he said. "Now, let's go see this."

I don't know what I had expected the line to be. Something cinematic, soldiers with weapons slung on their backs and dangling cigarettes from their lips walking behind barricades or leaning against thick trees, the muddy walls of trenches, whatever divided camp from no man's land. Their commanding officers would be holed up in burrows further back, in cavernous rooms strung with telegraph wires and made loud by the

clacking of passing codes. The whole idea was ridiculous and nostalgic for a sort of war I'd seen played out in movies. The closest analogue we had was the riots in Baltimore and LA and Ferguson, New York, Chicago. But those were police officers, and no matter how much we heard the complaints of militarization, it never seemed to be the same. The police still existed to protect and serve, the military to fight and conquer. And so it was difficult to imagine what Quarry wanted me to see, even when I tried to place it in the context of a modern war, tried to fill in imagery I'd seen of soldiers deployed to the Middle East, to Iraq and Afghanistan and, most recently, Syria, I saw only bases with high walls and sand-colored, sand-covered men and vehicles. Or I saw rubble. We saw so much more aftermath of these wars. Not so often the dead, but instead the Wounded Warriors commercials on television, the messages to the troops or their messages for us and their loved ones, taped via satellite and broadcast to millions for that reality television spontaneity that audiences lap up. Unless we sought out the images, watched the documentaries or scrolled through the thinkpieces and long-reads, we could nearly avoid the military's visual history of the last 20 years. And in its place, I mostly had the lens of Hollywood and blockbuster aesthetics. And how they would have loved it: the siege of a bright American city in springtime!

But it wasn't like that at all. Quarry pulled the car out of the complex and drove through the city in a zigzag pattern until he got to I-85 and sped northeastbound until abandoned cars started to appear, more and more frequent until it started to look like a set for the latest unnecessary zombie film. Quarry parked the car and said we needed to walk the rest of the way. Large trailers parked laterally across the lanes were flanked by

sedans, trucks, and a single rotten yellow station wagon that created an arrangement of snaking paths, none much wider than a single person at a time could traverse. And without Norm there to shush him constantly, Quarry chattered on as we walked one of the busiest arteries of the south, a place usually interspersed with assholes doing 100 and bumper to bumper snarls. The paths winded like snakes across both sides of the interstate, crossing over the median every so often. A few times we had to double back to make sure we were going the right way. There was some sort of code, I noticed after a bit. I caught Quarry looking for broken taillights, which seemed to signal which way *not* to go at a fork.

“They might have set this up too good,” Quarry told me.

“All the roads like this?”

“A lot of them are, yeah,” he said. “They just raided car dealerships and stuff like that. Anywhere where the keys would be pretty easy to get to.”

“That’s a lot of man hours,” I said.

“There’s a lot of people here, James. We got everyone we could to take this city.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” I said. I stepped around a car with an open passenger door. I noticed inside there was a propane tank. “Hey, can I ask, how come Charlotte? Nick sort of told me, but, you know. It was very political, lot of grandeur. Not a lot of actual reasoning.”

“It was his idea. He pumped out all sorts of information that it was going to be another city. Never even mentioned Charlotte. Then we showed up here. It’s a good city.

Nick knew his way around. It isn't as busy or sprawled as Atlanta. But there's another reason."

"Oh?"

"I don't know if I should say," he said. He stopped and looked at me, smiling. I knew he would say, but I'd have to play along.

"Come on, who am I going to tell?"

He laughed. He laughed so hard he doubled, holding his stomach. I didn't think it was that funny. "OK, OK. Fine. Here's your trivia for today. Did you know," and he paused and looked around as if afraid each car might overhear him, before he continued, "that 485 is almost exactly the same size as I-395 in Washington? Almost exactly. So Alvin said that if we could see how they sieged a city, we could see how they'd defend a city."

"Defend a city? You mean you want to...." I shook my head.

"It ain't going to happen like that. But if it ever became an issue, you know, down the road. We'd know then."

"Wow," I said.

"Right? Of course, some do think that D.C.'s the next step."

"But you don't."

"Hell no. This is it."

The media liked to play the American Reclamation up as a fortified coalition under siege. They sold that narrative, or perhaps bought that narrative, from me at times, and repackaged it for public consumption. But the truth was, the American Reclamation

could be as gridlocked as Congress. Their arguments became viciously personal at times, talking about each other's demons, their alcoholism or lack of patriotism, or their religious beliefs. They called each other horrible names, accused each other of being traitors and meth-heads scratching at imaginary itches and only clean because there was no supply in the city. Personal disputes were especially bad at the lower levels of power, like dogs fighting over scraps. But what made them function was the ability of the top few, especially Nick and Al, to hand out orders without allowing a single room for argument.

“Besides,” Quarry said, “can you imagine trying to turn this into a traveling circus? It'd be hell on Earth.”

We spoke a little more, though not about anything like that, for the last little bit of our hike. Mostly, Quarry went back to praising me on the posters. And then we came to a string of capsized trailers we had to go around, and just beyond that and a school bus that'd been wedged as a bright yellow plug between a series of RVs parked in the road, perpendicular to the concrete medians and from white stripe to white stripe on both sides of the interstate. The center one, straddling an emergency cutout, featured a large tarp extending from its roof for shade. The others made due with patchy awnings. Milk crates and flimsy beach and camping chairs loitered around charcoal grills and fire pits made out of reclaimed bricks. One pit billowed faint white smoke.

Quarry led me inside one of the campers. Four men lazed about, all of them skinny and unshaven and looking curiously at me as I stood near the front of the vehicle. Neither seemed to be more than a foot from a gun of some sort. One, sleeping on the

bench had a rifle near his feet, two sitting across the folding kitchen table that swung down from the wall played cards around the splayed legs of another propped on a bipod. Its barrel poked out the open window and its scope wedged between the slat blinds. The fourth man, sitting on the bed in a rear bedroom, fiddled with something in his hand while propping his feet on two separate propane tanks waiting to become IEDs.

“Well, fucking howdy, boys,” said one of the card players. “What brings you all the way out here?”

Quarry checked the scope of the rifle, shook hands with the men. “Just giving my friend here a tour. Anything new?”

“Nope. They keep thinking they’re invisible, sneaking around like we ain’t got game cameras set up all over the place.”

The one in the back spoke up: “Well, that’s not exactly true. Less movement the past few days. They been more skittish. Not coming as near.”

“You guys reporting that?” Quarry asked.

“Yeah. Seemed like either good news or real bad, but they made it sound good when we asked. So I guess they’re backing off a little.”

“Well, you might have this man to thank for that,” Quarry said.

“Hi, I’m—”

Quarry put his finger over his lips, tapped his ears. “So, other than that, anything I should know?”

The card player, the tunnel-eyed man, he went off swearing that the American Reclamation needed to attack, move the line forward or do something, now that there was

a lull. He got animated and slapped down his cards, the thwack of the laminate snapping like a whip in the little trailer. “They aren’t going to respect anything but guns, you know?”

“That’s not the orders for now, so don’t worry about it,” said the man from the back. “Just settle down.”

“I just...”

“I know, you get so riled,” said Quarry.

“Hot,” he nodded, scratching at his head with the furious shake of his hand.

“Better this than tanks rolling down the block and them going house by house,” I said.

“Sure, sure. But...”

Quarry leaned against the fake wood door of a closet. “Good weather today. Vision’s good. Can I send him upstairs?”

I looked around. There were no stairs. Quarry caught me looking at him and smiled.

“You want to see?” said the man in the back.

“See what?”

“Across the way. The rest of the world.”

“Out the window?” I asked.

“Nope. Can’t open those windows. They’re locked to keep the rifle there. No, you gotta go up,” said the man as he stood and crossed to the front of the RV, patting me to follow him back outside, to the pop-up junkyard on the interstate. From one of the milk

crates, he took a pair of binoculars and pointed to a glinting silver ladder on the rear of the caravan. “When you get up there, move slow. Stand up, hold both your arms high like you’re getting stuck up by Black Bart himself. Count to, I don’t know, twenty or so—slow, now, remember? And then you can use the binoculars.”

“Why?”

“Well, you move too fast, they might shoot you.”

“Just go slow, James,” Quarry said. His smile was gone. It looked like it’d never been there at all.

I climbed, hoisted myself onto the roof of the RV. It hadn’t gotten hotter, but I had to fight the urge to shiver from the sweat beading along my back. My arms went up and I counted: one, two, three...

A mile or so down was the vague outline of something, spanning across the road, well beyond the disturbed heat that quavered off the asphalt like melted nickel. At fifty, I put my arms down, found the binoculars around my neck, and brought them up slowly. The road swung in a gentle curve towards the right, its vanishing point cut off by a copse of thick trees. But at the start of that bend it looked, I thought it must look like, the back parking lot at the Pentagon: two rows deep of Humvees and armored personnel carriers. A man scrambled into a tank and then the cannon, which had been ordered on the school bus to my left, swung its barrel towards me in dead, eerie silence. Behind one of the vehicles I saw a man turn his head to consult with his spotter before he leaned back down to adjust a rifle.

That, the movement of the man, started another progression of thought like touching a match to a fuse: I could probably only see a fraction of whatever ordinance was aimed at me, and while I could see that sniper, there must have been more with their invisible crosshairs resting gently on my heart. Paralytic fear overwhelmed me. I let the binoculars fall from my hands, the strap snapping taut at the sudden weight. Was that movement too sudden? Does a bullet arrive first, or does its sound? Would I be able to tell? I put my hands back in the air. The strap rubbed at the sweat of my neck. Without the magnified vision, they almost weren't there at all. But only almost, because I thought I could pick out which speck ahead was the tank. Everything kept quiet and still except for the trees, accustomed to only being viewed by bored drivers or kids in the backseat with their faces smashed against the glass and wishing for home or wherever they were going, and those trees seemed appreciative of my attention, waving across the breeze and letting their leaves roil against one another in soft applause.

I managed to get myself down. Quarry and the man had waited for me, and now they led me back in, both commenting on my sudden paleness. One of them, I can't remember who, suggested I ought to come in and sit for a while. And I did, in the driver's seat of the RV. Quarry, meanwhile, asked if they needed anything. He said he could bring it out to them later and thumbed open a notebook to write down a list. They asked for movies, car batterieis, flashlights, beer, rounds, bacon, hot dogs, toilet paper.

"Cheerwine," said one of the cardsharks. "How can you hold a war in the south and not serve Cheerwine?"

Quarry laughed. “OK, boys. I’ll get that to you. I’m going to take him back. It looks like he’s had enough excitement for the day.”

“Excitement? He didn’t do nothing.”

“He’s an artist,” said Quarry, patting me on the shoulder. “What do you expect?”

We trekked back through the cars. I asked Quarry if I should worry about taking the wrong path, if there were booby-traps that would detonate if we took a wrong turn in this maze. He said that was something we didn’t have to worry about, that it was set up for remote denotation and everything was inert, only to be set off in case of a hasty retreat. Still, with fewer markers, the walk back took a little longer. Quarry didn’t try to talk much more than telling me about the IEDs, and I think he knew that I’d been shaken by what I saw. The only thing he said, when we were just a few feet from the car, was, “I bet that’ll be a hell of an image for you to work with.”

I thought about that in the car ride home. I put the radio on, but today it was just white noise. We drove opposite the direction of travel. And when we were back near the heart of the city, when there was no one out and clear roads, things stopped feeling strange.

When we pulled up in front of the apartment, I asked Quarry if I could take the newspapers he’d brought me, and he agreed and offered to bring them in for me, tucking them under his arm as he got out with me and followed up the stairs to my apartment. He made a cursory search of the place, spending more time looking at my movie cabinet than anything else. I told him to take what he wanted, but he just waved me off and went back

to pretending to look for anyone or anything suspicious in my apartment. After a few minutes, he went back to the movies.

“Lot of old ones here.”

“Yeah. I love old movies.”

“Me too,” he said. “Especially detective movies.”

“I’ve got *Maltese Falcon* there.”

“Would you mind?”

“Of course not.”

He ran his fingers along the case spines, then delicately plucked it out from the rack. He took another one, held it up with the rear cover facing me so I couldn’t tell exactly what it was, but I nodded anyway. “Thanks.” His narrow eyes studied me for a minute, and he approached slowly, shuffling his feet. He put his monstrous hand on my shoulder. “You OK? You look shook up.”

“Just a little.” I paused. “I wasn’t expecting all that.”

He nodded like he understood, and I appreciated that.

“I’m going to get those boys the stuff they asked for and have someone drive it out for me. Want to get it to them before dark, so I should get going.”

“Right,” I said. I went to the fridge and pulled out a Coke for him. “Stay safe, OK?”

The can nearly disappeared his grip. “I’ll be fine. Always am.”

I stood in the middle of the apartment for a few minutes after he left. There didn’t seem to be anywhere to go, anywhere to move. I tried to think of something to do, just

one little action that would break my acute claustrophobia. My shirt was soaked with sweat. I could change first. One little thing, I told myself. And I managed to go to the bedroom and put on something fresh and dry, and it brought me that small sense of renewal. I went to run the tap to get some water and as I did I noticed Ms. Gallot was down tending the garden, hunched and wearing a green dress as if to disguise herself as a large knoll on which more of her flowers could grow. I went down the back steps. “Hey, Ms. Gallot.”

She didn’t look up.

A confused butterfly that had been attempting to pollinate one of the concrete roses that ornamented the benches flew over towards her and her flowers, its bright orange wings furious in the air.

“No Beth, huh? That medicine working out for you?”

She stood, looked at me. She wasn’t tall. Her skin wrinkled and it seemed like each one was made by the tough memories of a hard-fought life. I felt like I’d accidentally goaded her, and that made me feel brave, but foolishly so, like the first time you drive a car too fast on an empty stretch of highway and then coast back down to speed, knowing what you’ve chanced. “James,” she said, taking a long pause and an even, raspy breath between her words. “Stay away.”

“I..”

“No,” she said. And then her eyes shifted. They were looking behind me. I turned. Quarry had come back. He doffed his cap.

“Sorry, ma’am. Just need to borrow him for a second.”

“You can keep him,” she said.

Quarry chuckled, curling his arm around my shoulders and giving me a stern push in the direction of the apartments. “Why don’t you come back up with me? I need to talk to you right quick.”

I nodded. I realized that Nick and I had come to an agreement, of sorts, about Beth. But it was fragile, and I didn’t even know if he had told Quarry. He almost certainly hadn’t told Norm. I started to think of ways to weasel out of trouble, but nothing that wouldn’t have gotten me in more trouble immediately sprang to mind. I just imagined Nick being angry when this got back to him.

The door slammed behind us, the door to Ms. Gallot’s apartment. It rattled on its hinges. Beth was looking down at her shirt, holding the full watering can in one hand and cradling its bottom with the other. She was halfway to Quarry when she looked up and saw his pistol aiming steadily at her. I swung out from under his arm and put myself between the gun and her, my heartbeat pummeling my chest like it might break the bone. My pulse dizzied me, the way it whorled in my ear.

“Nobody move,” Quarry said.

Beth dropped the watering can, splashing its fill out across the back of my legs. Cool water trickled down my legs in rivulets.

I raised my hand, slowly. “It’s OK,” I said.

“James?” Beth’s voice broke, on the cusp of tears. For once, she didn’t sound tough.

“Shut up,” Quarry told her.

I took a small, brave step forward. “Quarry, Quarry. Look at me. Please. Everything’s fine. It’s fine. Come on, lower that. Beth lives with Ms. Gallot downstairs. She’s a friend of mine.”

Quarry looked at Beth, back at me. He slid the pistol into the holster on the small of his back.

Turning back towards Beth, I reached and put my hand out. She took it, crushing my fingers. “Just go back inside, Beth. Take your aunt, and go back inside. Everything is going to be fine.”

She looked at me, and I saw her mind start to race through all her sudden questions. I wished as hard as I could that she wouldn’t ever ask them. “Come on, Aunt Tracy. Let’s go inside.”

Ms. Gallot started to reach for the shears she’d been pruning with but Quarry barked for her to leave them so loudly the old woman jumped as if suddenly inflated. She dashed past as fast as her legs would run her and grabbed Beth by the elbow. When they were inside, when it was quiet again, I looked around. I saw blinds shaking as their occupants had retreated back into their houses, not wanting to be seen.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said.

“Good fucking idea,” Quarry answered.

I led, him a step behind. Inside my apartment, I sat on the couch like a child waiting to find out their punishment: slumped back against the cushions, head hanging so I wouldn’t have to look him in the eyes. Quarry checked every room of the apartment twice, then went to each window and drew the shutters. The whole apartment became the

gray sort of dark that only happens inside on sunny days. He stopped me when I went to turn on a lamp. “Talk,” he said.

“That’s Beth. Downstairs neighbor. Nice girl.”

“James,” Quarry warned. And then, after a moment, his face broke open, a smile that revealed those big white teeth.

“What?” I asked.

“You just think I’m dumb, don’t you? She’s cute. She’s too young for you, but she’s cute.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Didn’t I just tell you not to treat me like I’m dumb. Man, I know a thing when it’s looking me in the face like that.” Quarry started laughing, a low chuckle. “Man, Nick knew you were going to get into trouble.”

“I can guess. So Nick told you?”

“He said that I was to make exactly one exception. You could see the woman downstairs. He didn’t tell me her name. He didn’t tell me anything about her except that if she came by sometimes, maybe I ought to look the other way. Speaking of, do you know how lucky you are that she surprised me and not Norm?”

“I can guess,” I said.

“Good. I know that man is running around with his hookers, but—”

“Nick?”

“No. Norm. That old geezer acting lick this is the sack of Rome.”

“How did that happen?”

“Man, you know that strip club, Uptown Cabaret? They still have that place open. American Reclamation only, but it’s open.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“When the rapture comes, the only thing that’s going to be open the next day is church and the titty bar.”

I laughed. And then, in the lull after, I looked at him square as I could. “Any way we can not tell Nick this happened?”

“You owe me one,” Quarry said. He thought about it a moment. “Hell, you probably owe me double. I just made your life easy. Pulled you a favor. You were ice cold, stepping in front of me—and don’t ever do that shit again, by the way. But man you pulled it off. You going to be here hero.” He changed his voice to an unpleasant falsetto: “You saved me, James. You’re my hero.”

And I was sure it would not play out like that.

“Why’d you come back?”

“You left this in the car,” Quarry said, tossing a notebook on the table. “Nick says he’s going to want to see something soon, whatever you got next. Like, a week or less.”

“Got it,” I said. “You ought to go get those guys that stuff. Before dark, like you said.”

“I should,” he said. He started for the door.

“Hey, Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“You wouldn’t have shot her, would you?”

“Until she dropped.”

CHAPTER THREE

Beth must have been watching for Quarry to leave, because as soon as his car pulled out she was up and pounding on my door. “It’s open,” I said. I’d expected her to come charging into the room, demanding answers, but she slipped in and closed the door behind her softly, her hand bracing just above the doorknob as if to urge its quietness. She came towards me two steps and then faltered, instead retreating back to the couch, where she perched herself on the car corner, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, clutching her wrist tight as if to lock something out. She rested her chin on the rift between her knees. She watched me, and I stood there not wanting to say anything at all. But eventually, I said, “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t even...” and her voice trailed off. “What is going on?”

“It’s,” and now it was my turn for words to fail. “It’s a long story.”

“You knew him,” she said.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“He’s a friend of mine.”

“What?”

“Quarry is a friend of mine.”

“That’s all you’re going to say? Is that he’s a friend of yours?”

“What do you want me to say? I’ve lived her for six years. I know people from all over the city.”

“I know how friends fucking work, James,” She sat up and straightened her back

“Calm down.”

“Fuck you,” she said, her voice now loud and high. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“Beth.” I said, but she cut me off as she leapt off the couch and came chest to chest with me, pushing me backwards.

“I’m not kidding, James. Fucking spill it. What the hell is going on.”

“Yes, he’s one of them. But he’s a friend. He isn’t going to hurt anyone, and he isn’t going to give us any trouble.”

“Are you sure?” She still looked uneasy, and I put my hands on her shoulders and nodded, smiling at her as best I could. I pulled her into me and her arms wrapped around my back. “You’re sure?”

“Very sure. We’ll be perfectly safe,” I promised her.

She leaned back from my arms and looked at me. Her gray eyes like some luminescent surface of the moon, distant and still sharp as they searched my face. “I don’t believe you.” But she let me hold her for a moment before she pulled free from me. “Do you have anything to drink?”

“Just soda,” I told her.

She grimaced, but took one anyway. Its carbonated sizzle was the only sound between us.

“Is your aunt OK?”

“She’s fine. Apparently, it isn’t the first time she’s had a gun pulled on her.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really. I guess she worked the overnight cashier shift for a gas station when she was about my age and it got held up two or three times.”

I went over to the couch and sat, and Beth came next to me. She curled her legs under herself and leaned her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I told her.

“Were you scared?” she asked.

“No time for it. I was worried about you,” I told her. It was a lie, but a good enough one: she kissed me on the cheek and her fingers laced themselves between mine. For all we’d done and the entire time we’d been together, it struck me as by far the most intimate thing to happen between us.

“It got me thinking, you know,” Beth took a long sip from her drink and gathered something of her thoughts for a minute before she continued, “It made me think about my parents. I’m sure they’re worried about me, but I wish I could let them know I was safe.”

“I’m sure they think you’re fine. I haven’t heard of anyone getting hurt.”

“I’m sure it happens, though,” she said. “There’s never not violence. Whenever this ends, there’s going to be people who get hurt and people who will die. But that’s not what’s weird to me. What’s weird is there’s going to be people who just disappear, or they might die and no one will know. Like, who’s to say someone died in the city when maybe they just left? Maybe they were on the buses and trucks at the start and got out, or maybe they found some way through. You can have people starting new things, just skipping out on their whole lives. People who just disappear, one way or another.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” I said.

“I’m sure it already has.”

I put my head back against the couch. There was a rush of thought about who might be missing me, who was worried or would look for me after. A few friends, here and there. Old classmates. My parents. But it seemed like a pretty small circle, and thinking of myself at its center felt claustrophobic. Even with the interconnectedness of social media, how many of my friends or followers or connections would notice? Something less than a quarter, maybe one in ten. Some might only notice because I stopped posting. I closed my eyes for a bit, drained by everything that’d happened. And after a while, though I couldn’t say how long, the weight on the couch shifted. I heard the soft padding of her feet as she walked across the room, then the clanging as she deposited a can in the recycling bin. She said something about it almost being full, and I remembered a story I’d heard once about Lebanon and the garbage strikes, just mounds and mounds of refuse piled everywhere in the cities and no one collecting it, the start of diseases spreading—cholera and other horrible afflictions—that eventually led to unrest. And that hadn’t happened here. The American Reclamation still collected garbage. It struck me as so odd, so odd I almost laughed. How tenuous our lives!

And then I heard Beth again. She said, “Oh, hey, the drawing of my tattoo in here?” and I heard her opening my portfolio. I knew what she’d see. I opened my eyes. Even if I had been faster than light I don’t think I would have gotten there before she saw the posters, gasping as she dropped the portfolio and it clattered on the floor. It was the picture of the Grier Brothers. Colorful and gruesome.

“What the fuck is that?”

I made it over to her and picked up the portfolio, snapped it shut.

“James?”

“It’s just something I’m working on. A new project.”

“A project for what?”

“I’ve never had so much time to make art. I’ve got no clients or anything, so what the hell, I thought I’d do something weird.”

Beth looked at the portfolio tucked under my arm, then around the room.

Quarry had set the newspapers by the movie cabinet. She saw them first and beat me to them by a step. Above the fold, the same picture she’d seen covered the front of *The Washington Post*. She turned to block me from reaching for the papers, using her body as a shield as she read, “Pictures given to the Washington Post were verified by a source known to be in contact with the American Reclamation. According to reports, Donald and Clifton Grier were ambushed by United States marines and killed in a firefight in Lake Norman.” The newsprint rasped as she shifted the papers in her hand to look at the others. A few had my actual artwork there. She turned and looked at the portfolio under my arm. Everything caught up to her all at once.

She made a run for the door. I flipped the portfolio aside, it sliding across the table and onto the floor as I caught her by the shoulder and she spun and stumbled, her back slamming hard into the door, her body caroming off as she let out some wounded sound. She slid down slowly until she was sitting under me. As I knelt down towards her she lashed out with her feet. A heavy kick that glanced off my thigh just above the knee almost knocked my leg out from under me. I took a step back. She stood and reached

behind herself for the door handle, but I was faster. I covered her hand on the knob and laid my forearm against her clavicle. Her hair brushed against my fingers. I saw her knee coming for me and hit aside with my own.

“Stop it,” I told her.

“Get off me, you bastard.” She tried to kick me again and missed. “I’m going to—”

“Stop, Beth. If you keep fighting, I’m going to hurt you.” I didn’t mean it as a threat. I meant that I might slip and elbow her in the windpipe or something. But her eyes, they’d been shut as she writhed under me and now they opened and met my gaze. Her head moved in a swift blow that caught me in the temple. With the hand that’d been covering hers I reached up behind her neck, wrapping my fingers in the strands as if I was grabbing netting to hoist, jerking it once roughly so her skull cradled in the heel of my palm. “Please,” I said, and I was begging.

“Fuck you.”

I let my hand out of her hair, took my forearm off her chest. I backed up a step, but I kept my hands on her shoulders. “Beth, if you tell anyone, you’re going to get yourself and your aunt, and probably me, killed. Quarry is a friend, and he’s a good person. He won’t hurt you. But you’re right, there are some bad people here. And if they find out about me and you, and if they find out that you put what they’re doing in danger, they might come for you. I promise, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I couldn’t let you run out, though.” She could have broken free if she wanted. “I’m going to let you go now,” I said.

She shrugged me off. She stared me down. “I never want to see you again,” she said. She pushed me hard enough that I almost fell, and then opened the door into a narrow crack, just wide enough to slip through. I heard her run down the steps to her aunt’s apartment and I closed and locked my door.

I spent the next morning listening for the car, and when I heard it pull in and the door slam, I met Norm at the door and told him I needed to meet with Nick, that it was urgent. He nodded, then signaled me to head outside with him. They wanted me to go to the studio, put the finishing touches on new work and print anything I needed to. I said, “No, I mean I want to see him today. I’m not going anywhere, doing anything until he and I talk.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Norm asked. “You do what we ask, not the other way around.” He came back towards me, placing his hands on his hips and looking around, looking everywhere but me. I wasn’t sure if he was searching for something in the apartment, hoping to catch something I shouldn’t have or looking for something beyond my understand, or if he was trying not to look at me to keep his temper down. I’d never known Norm for his restraint, but I appreciated it here. “Come on, get your stuff,” he said.

I didn’t move. I didn’t respond.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Stop fucking around. We’re on a schedule today.”

“I want to meet with Nick. I’m putting myself at risk doing these posters, I’m doing him a favor. The least he can do to return the favor is have a conversation with me when I ask for one.”

“He’s not sitting on his ass eating bonbons,” Norm said. “You have a job to do, too.”

“Nope,” I said. I shrugged.

His face reddened, dimples like bruised tomatoes as the blood rose in his cheeks. He stormed out, presumably to the car to consult with Quarry. I knew that, if it came down to the very worst of it, I would have to go with them. They could leverage Quarry’s hulking frame, or the fact that there was two of them, or the fact that they had guns and I did not. Or they could leverage Beth. I knew that. But I had a bit of hope it wouldn’t go that way.

When Norm came back in, he stopped at the doorway and looked back, as if making sure he wasn’t watched. I realized that was exactly what he was doing: he was making sure Quarry, still sitting in the car, or maybe loitering outside of it, couldn’t see that Norm drew his pistol from its holster. He kept it low, at the hip and in his left hand. If he fired, he’d take out my appendix. All of this seemed to tell me that he had nothing, that Quarry hadn’t backed him up. “Nick wouldn’t like that,” I said.

“I’d make sure he never found out.” Norm smiled, more like a kink in his lips that revealed the split brown of a dead tooth. “Don’t fuck around, Middleton. Let’s go.”

“Have a good day, Norm,” I said.

This was my play: Beth didn't know what she'd found out, but what she did know was bad enough. If she talked to anyone, if she said anything, she was in danger. The incident with Quarry in the garden still rang in my mind, a warning bell. I'd done what Nick wanted, but I'd done it well enough—according to the papers—that I had some buying power now, I could make some demands. I could protect Beth and myself. I could do what Nick needed quietly, let the roil of the occupation play out. How much of this was because I had seen the line and was afraid?

“You think you're safe because you're Nick's friend? I don't know what he's told you, boy, but he ain't the only one you need to worry about in this city.”

“Just tell Nick I need to talk to him.”

Quarry interrupted: “Hey, we can't sit any longer. Let's go. You coming or not?”

“No,” I said.

“Fine.”

Norm told me to consider this my one-day vacation, that he'd see me tomorrow and I was coming with them even if he had to drag me out.

I turned and walked back to my bedroom and shut the door. I heard them leave, heard them lock my door. I saw the glinting of light against my blinds as the car pulled off. Its mirrors, the sun. They might come back, I thought. But Quarry had been anxious to go. And I could not go down to Beth's. After what happened, I wanted to protect her but I was conflicted about ever seeing her again. I knew what I'd done but struggled to come to terms with it. Because I wasn't like that, you see. Because that wasn't me—it was some lucid nightmare that I'd experienced. A hallucination, a trick of the eye and the

muscles, an orchestrated con that I had been the victim of, its purpose to damage my friendship with Beth, to make me lose my temper. Some force showing me I wasn't so different, that I was part of this. That the few times my father hit me, the more times he'd hit my mother, were enough of that cyclic violence to root. And I knew that none of that was true. It was just me. I had lost my temper, I had been scared, I had felt a dozen horrible things all at once, none of which mattered when the result was the same: I couldn't go down and see Beth.

Instead, I sat on my bed. I stared at the television that hadn't worked in weeks. At some point I drifted off to sleep, and when I woke up and things weren't any different, I felt depressed. It was a literal feeling, too, the real heart of the word: as if someone had settled me under the thumb of giant, on soft earth, and pushed me into the loam. And when I couldn't fall back asleep I went and made food that I barely ate. I sat down to work. I thought about the poster I had promised to do at the meeting, the one of Maurice Tavish.

One of the newspapers had run a photo of Tavish below the fold, talking about his upcoming trial. It wasn't a good picture, but it was enough to jog my memory and from there I could sketch Tavish. He'd been on every paper and screen, all over the web and social media for weeks after he shot James Sunter. Large brown eyes and sloping wrinkles that melded into a deep scar on his right cheek. Dark skin, heavy shadows. Unshaven. What had they called him in the meeting? Nigger and thug? Did those people see him differently than I saw him, because I saw him as just a guy who'd taken a gun to a New York studio and shot a blowhard pundit. I didn't see a monster so much as I saw a

man, and the latter is a far worse thing in this world. But I tried to make my drawing of Tavish like they must have seen him. An ominous portrait. Under the sharp nadir of his chin, I put in the barrel of a gun, the smoke from its murderous firing wafting horizontally under his jawline. I curled the wisps to read SUNTER. I knew, with a grimy, uneasy feeling, that Nick and other members of the American Reclamation would like it.

That took me to dinner. I wasn't counting hours, just meals. If it had gone on longer, I might have moved just to atmospheric phenomena: sunrise, twilight, sunset. I was hungry, though, so I cooked and I ate in silence. It was more unpleasant than usual. I found myself tapping my fork against my plate, clinking silver against ceramic just for the sake of hearing something. After I finished the dishes I found myself entirely without something obvious or demanding to do, so I grabbed a book and curled on the couch. It was getting dark, turning into a lovely spring night, and so I opened the window and let the cool breeze through the screen.

Because I'd opened the screen, I heard the car first. I'd managed to drift off again, the book a tipi on my chest. Three doors opened and closed. I didn't chance looking out the window, but I stood in front of it, listening like prey that hears the hunter. Keys by the door. I didn't have time to run deeper into the apartment, so I slid into the space of the door's in-swing, pressing myself flat against the wall. It opened slowly, four fingers of a big hand wrapped around the thickness of the door. There was a tempting moment to kick against the door like they do in the movies, but the people at the door were quick. One was in, heading towards the couch. The second, a portly, gray-haired man I'd never seen and wearing a pistol on his hip, headed straight, towards the bedroom. Before anyone else

came in I threw my body against the door. It hit something, nearly closed, and then swung back open as if on a spring, crashing back into me and tossing me back towards the wall. I caught the brick with the back of my shoulder and spun off, onto the floor. And then weight fell on me, across my side and back as it flipped me onto my stomach. My chin hit the hardwood and my jaw rattled, lucky not to bite through anything. The weight on me wrenched my hands behind my back. My wrists were bound in the shape of a fishtail as plastic ties zipped around them.

“Dammit, James, stop.”

It was Quarry. He was farther away, not the one sitting on me. Whoever that was said, “Fights like a fish.”

“Pull him up,” Norm said. He hung a black pillowcase over my head, filled my nose with the minty smell of dust. “Car ready?”

“Yeah,” Quarry said. I heard footsteps head towards the door, then stop. “Wow. Look at this. I’m going to bring it. I’ll put it in the car. Don’t fuck with him.”

I almost threw up when the punch hit me in the gut. It snatched the air from my lungs, took everything from them it felt like, and in the absence the lobes ate at themselves, gnashing teeth carving up my chest. I fell to my knees with a heavy thud, one I was sure Beth would hear downstairs. I hoped she ignored it. My body still couldn’t get any air, my diaphragm in spasm. I rolled onto my side. Something lightly tapped my head, then set down next to it. A boot?

“Come on, quit falling over,” Norm said. He, or someone, hooked their arms under my own, wrenched me up, and led me out to the car. They put me in the trunk. It wasn’t a long ride.

Soon as I heard the latch on the trunk pop, I demanded to know where we were going.

“Going? We’re already here. You wanted to see Nick, didn’t you?”

A bell tolled the hour. There were plenty of churches close to my apartment, churches all over the city. But I knew Nick wouldn’t have brought me to a house of worship to talk treason. We were at the college.

They marched me to a building not far from the car. “Steps coming. We’re going down. Be careful,” Quarry said. He grabbed me by the elbow and I could feel the featherweight tension of his hand in front of my chest, in case I stumbled. He must have been going down almost sideways to help me. Then, as we reached the bottom, I felt a twinge of cold metal before my hands were cut free.

They took my blindfold off in a room filled with the phantasmal blue glow of a dozen outdated desktops. The title screen for *Halo 2* flickered across the projector screen at the front of the classroom and there were two chairs arranged at the front of the room, obviously for players; in one of them, Nick sat with a stack of papers on his lap, smiling crookedly in the glow. He set the papers aside and, though I’d never seen him with glasses on, he took off a pair and set them nearby. He stood, becoming awash in the projector’s spectacular light.

“How are you, James?”

I looked around, back towards Quarry. Norm and the white-haired man were standing near the stairs, talking to one another but both watching me intently. “I’ve been better.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve had a long day too, if it makes you feel better. Quarry told me you wanted to talk.”

I pointed at the screen as if I hadn’t heard him. “You remember I almost failed a class playing this with you, right?”

“I’ve got some beer too. Thought we both deserved a night off.”

“How hard do you think I work?”

Nick laughed. “Hard enough that I’m grateful.” He looked over my shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Something in James’ apartment.” Quarry passed forward the drawing I’d done that afternoon.

“Great. We’ll look at. You guys can go. Tac-2 when I’m ready.”

“Sure,” Quarry said. He walked down the hall, collected Norma and the white-haired man.

I took the black, pelvis-shaped controller from him. Neither of us spoke as he tapped through the menus. Nick needed to squint, and he tried for a minute before he gave up and put on his glasses. He looked like a stranger. Thinking about it, I guess I had seen him wearing glasses, but never in person. Only on the news, a couple of stills from when he read on the floor of the House, maybe. But it was strange. The glasses made him look older. More erudite, sure, but something else too: he looked sober, sharp. Even when

the game started and we occasionally muttered at one another, taunting and swearing, and I dared to take my eyes off the screen to look at him, there was this sternness, settled mostly in his eyes and magnified by those dark, horn-rimmed lenses.

Mid-match, his character stopped firing rockets at me and stood in the middle of the open ground as if staring over that no-man's land on I-85. Nick said, "You know, Alex and I have started playing this together." He rested the controller on his knee. "I'm glad you don't have kids yet, James. They don't have to be a part of this." I tucked the controller in my left hand and shifted so I was looking at him. I didn't have anything to say yet. I wanted to let him talk; I wanted Nicholas Brewer to bear his soul to me so I could understand everything he did, so I could see the world as he saw it. I've looked for that in everyone I've met, their vision of the world, and for a moment I felt like Nick might say something that would make it clear to me, like looking through glass without seeing the dingy reflection of myself clouding the image. "I'm glad you don't really have anyone to miss. You've made more out of this situation than I think anyone would imagine. Somehow you're less alone than when this started."

"I guess so," I said. "I hadn't thought about it like that at all. I mean, I'm sure my parents are freaking out." I tried to picture what they might be doing at the hour and couldn't. It was just after 10 p.m. and Winston-Salem felt far away.

Nick stuttered an apology. He smiled, though. Something genuine. He said, "Your mom must be going insane. You're her baby."

"Shut up." My mother, it was known, could not handle crisis. She went straight to cartoonish levels of panic, which only got worse because my father couldn't stand it. She

would worry and worry and then at some point that I had never figured out, she'd return to normal, to a calm and being around her then felt like sailing a boat through the eye of a hurricane, the return to thunderheads and wind inevitable but for a moment quiet. It'd been long enough, I hoped, that she'd come down, settled into a mild anxiety, sometimes struck by pangs of horrible omen and bad things happening to me but largely thinking that I was OK, that everything was fine. That I was in no danger, and least of all was I doing this: hanging out, playing video games with the political leader of the American Reclamation. Maybe she would be asleep, or on the couch watching an old movie or some cop procedural with my dad. Maybe they weren't even thinking about me, and it felt like an odd thing to hope, but I hoped they weren't.

“Oh, man. I forgot about that. You were so embarrassed. She called you, what, ‘Pumpkin,’ right? Right in front of Ashley Malone.”

“Yes, she did. It was awful. Thanks for bringing it up.”

“Of course,” he said.

“So, Alex and Jessie are...”

“Alex, Jessie, and Mary,” Nick said. I hadn't known there were three. I had seen Alex and Jessie, briefly, three years ago. I was in Washington, D.C. on a pass-through to a friend's gallery opening and a work conference in New York. Stopping in over an evening, Nick had insisted I let him take me out to dinner. After all, he would be moving soon, returning to South Carolina to prepare to run for office. The small apartment in Arlington that overlooked some ugly part of the Potomac was packed into boxes, that liminal space between home and former residence. Alex, four, met me at the door. Jessica

was six months. Nick doted on her, carried her everywhere. I thought it broke his heart, just a bit, when he had to pass her off to his wife, Rachel, so we could go to the restaurant.

Mary was almost one that night we played video games at the college. In a few weeks her father would celebrate her birthday on a Thursday, alone in a city besieged by his own design.

“Have you heard from them at all?” I asked.

“No, I have not.” Nick took a long pull from his beer. “Cannot, I guess is more the way of things, really.

His house must have been a makeshift prison for his wife and kids, with FBI agents in those slick, dark blue windbreakers and men in dark suits with guns tucked at the hips and armpits walking around the house constantly. Always watching them, maybe even questioning Rachel daily. If there ever came a spare moment from law enforcement, I’m sure the news media jumped to fill it. Flashbulbs, cameras, microphones in their faces like disorienting weapons. And all in vain, since Nick—I could tell by his dejection—would never try to communicate with them, wouldn’t put them in danger. It would have been risky. The United States had gotten too much practice tracking people over the past quarter century. Dictators in spiderholes, couriers to Pakistani compounds, terrorists across the mountains and deserts and caves and cities of the Middle East. The reaped consequences from the state’s hypervigilance. They’d find Nick sooner or later, if they hadn’t already. But he wasn’t going to help them out none.

Nick sat forward and cupped his hands around his ears as if the quiet room roared, but only he could hear it and be tortured by the sound. The his head lowered into his crossed arms and I heard him sniffing, on the brink of crying. I got him another beer, walking slowly to the cooler, and patted him on the back.

“It’s going to be all right,” I told him.

“How do you think they’ll remember me?”

“What?”

“My kids, James. What will they think about this when they’ve grown up? What will they remember? That I never picked them up from school and was never around? Mary, oh God, if something happens to me, Mary might not even remember me. I’ll just be in a history book and I don’t know what it will say. That I did what was necessary for the country, or that I was a traitor?” The summer of their mother crying, often and late into the night but doing her best to never let them see. The summer daddy was on the news everyday. And when they were older, building an understanding of what they couldn’t remember, their family life paraphrased for them by the whole world, what would they decide about him?

“Don’t worry about that now,” I said. “You still haven’t told me about them. It’s been a while.”

Nick started to rattle off stories, things he found funny. At first, they were rote, cold responses to my obvious attempt to distract him. But they got more personal, beyond kids mismatching clothes to the funny, unique misunderstandings. They’d found out Alex was colorblind like Nick when the boy had trouble figuring out when to cross the street.

It felt like a breakthrough, though. Not just because his mood after changed, as he picked up the controller and blew my sprite across the screen, but because it felt like I had been part of his compartmentalization, a friend who'd become just an acquaintance, a coworker or less, moved due to the sequestration of the personal life from his political persona. I felt like his friend again, honestly. Not just a method.

He blew me up again before I could get to my controller. "Damn, boy, I was looking for you everywhere. Took me forever to figure out you were hiding up there. Anyway...I vented. Now it's your turn. Tell me what happened today. Why you wanted to see me."

"I wanted to talk about what I'm doing for you. My, you know, helping out, or whatever. I imagine you heard from Quarry about what happened."

"More or less."

"Well, I want to know my neighbors are going to be safe. I need to know more about what's going on. Nick..." I paused the game and looked at him, but he did not turn to look at me. "I don't really believe in what I'm doing. And I should. If I'm going to help you, I should."

"I can't make you believe in what we're doing here, James," Nick said.

"No, I know. I mean, I understand. You can't just snap your fingers and convert me. Otherwise you would."

Nick did indeed snap his fingers.

“See, didn’t work. I need assurance. That people aren’t being unnecessarily hurt, that Beth and her aunt are going to be safe. I want to know if my neighbors are going to be safe, too. Not just the ones I’m close to.”

“I can’t promise anything. You should realize that. There’s danger involved in great changes.”

“I get that, I do. But, like, what about what I found at that store, the bullet holes and shit in the wall. Did that ever get figured out?”

“What?” We both watched each other a moment, like we both were waiting for the punchline. Nick broke first: “No one ever told me about anything like that.”

“I told whoever picked me up for that meeting last week.”

“I will have it looked into, I promise. That still doesn’t invalidate what I’m saying though: I can’t promise you anything.”

“But you can. You can promise that if Beth or her aunt are around my place, it won’t be a problem. You can promise that my work won’t be going to see anymore dead kids splayed out in the middle of the fucking street. I don’t know how I fit into this whole thing you’ve got set up, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable with the way it is now.”

Nick raised his voice, frustrated: “The way it is now is the way it is.” He stood, paced towards the back of the room. “We’re doing everything we can for the American people, everything they won’t do and they just sit on their fat asses and watch us dangle. It’s fucking bullshit. You can’t give up on this James. You have to help me.”

“You’re conflating helping with committing treason.”

“No,” he said. “I’m telling you that helping will make it so that we don’t have to worry about treason. We can win this. Their poll numbers are so far down, their approval ratings lower than rat shit. Their unfavorables are upwards of 65 percent in some cases. We’re doing things right. Do not get cold feet on me.”

“Then give me more,” I said.

“More what? You have everything! You don’t shop, you don’t have any of the curfews or ration barriers that other people have. You want to be able to see Beth, fine. I told you I was fine with it, just to be careful. You weren’t. You screwed up. Not me.”

I had, but not in the way he thought. I couldn’t get out of my head what had happened, my hands on her like that. I lashed out at him again. “Isn’t this whole thing about a sense of freedom?”

“It is. And right now, we’re fighting the people who are unknowingly oppressed to give up those freedoms.”

“Whatever,” I said. I turned back towards the game.

“Nothing for you can change. I’ve done everything I can. You are going to be fine and so is Beth.”

We kept playing, but spoke less for the next hour. I could sense how frustrated we both were. Eventually, Nick got on the radio and called for Quarry and Norm. They were only a few minutes out and in those few minutes, Nick pulled out the poster of Tavish that Quarry had smuggled out of my apartment while I was blindfolded. “This is brilliant. It isn’t the portrait I was expecting.”

“Right,” I said. “Still supposed to make one of you.”

“Yes, you are. But I like this. Take some time, do what you want. Can we run this? I can get it printed tonight and out tomorrow.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

“Do you want to sign it or something? Don’t artists like to do that?”

“I’d rather not sign anything that could be used against me in a court. Especially if that outcome is likely to kill me or send me to Guantanamo or something.”

Nick laughed. “OK.”

Quarry opened the door then.

“One more minute, Mike,” Nick said. Quarry walked back down the hall and Nick turned to me. “He said she’s real cute. Keep seeing her. Don’t let me know about it.”

As if what Nick said gave me some sort of permission, I woke up the next morning resolved to find a way to keep seeing Beth. I spent most of the previous night with Nick and for half the time I just missed her because she had become some sort of constant. I felt like a weathervane, spinning at each direction a squall buffeted me in—but no matter how fast I spun, the house kept its steady foundation. It knew its place, what it was made of. It looked out over the land and saw the way the grass moved, took notice, and still stayed. That was Beth, and I was going to be damned if I disconnected myself from that. So I made my coffee early and kept vigilance by the windows, hoping she’d come out to the garden. When she didn’t come, I went down to the stone tables in the courtyard center and I stayed there under the cloudless sky until Beth’s drone, the one she’d pointed out before, flew over.

Then I decided to be proactive about things. My. Gallot's fingers pushed aside the curtain that hung down to the transom of her back door's window, looking at me with elephant skin and an eye like a big pea. She pulled away. I knocked once more after a minute, but the door still didn't open. I was actually walking away, temporarily retreating, when it did. I turned back. Ms. Gallot looked stout and dour as ever and wore an umbrage blue nightgown that fit like a too-large tablecloth.

"What do you want?"

"Will Beth have a word with me?"

She smirked. I lowered my head. Her knees were veiny and bulbous and her feet stared back at me with a pair of yellow rabbit slippers. Peeps, I realized. The left one was cycloptic, with black, wiry thread sticking out from where the eye had gone lost.

"Please," I said, more to the rabbit than her.

She stepped back from the doorway and let me come in. Any apartment with the same layout as your own feels like a natural oddity, like unlearning a fact you'd known for ages. The hardwood floors were the same, the walls at the same angles, but in the center of the living room, where most people would have put a television—where my television was, in fact—there was just a large grandfather clock. Its silver bob swung, back and forth, back and forth to the amusement of all the living room chairs and a Victorian print loveseat. They all faced it, at the least. I imagined Beth sitting, flicking an imaginary remote and wishing the pendulum would change itself into a movie.

"Just sit," Ms. Gallot said. She pointed to a little wooden chair, and I did sit while she went down the hall and turned into the spare bedroom. As if by magic, the woman

who emerged was beautiful. She crossed her arms; her jaw tensed as if wires run through it were pulled taut. Beth watched me and I watched her, much as I could before I became embarrassed again and looked away. It seemed we stood there for an immensity of time, quiet for ages, lifetimes and millennia, through the heat death of the universe. Outside the siege might have ended and the wheel of time spun back around to that same moment again. And then I realized she might turn and go before I said anything. “I’m so sorry,” I said, and that was all I said.

“That’s not enough.” Beth sat on the loveseat, across from me. She pulled her knees up to her chest. Her hands folded into a cathedral over top of them. And then they broke, her arms crossing her chest again like a gate.

“I will tell you everything I can,” I said.

“So there’s something to tell?”

“Yes,” I said. And for the next hour, I told her everything about Nick, from how we’d met all a decade ago to our meeting the night before. I told her about my time in graduate school, about how I was the perfect propaganda artist for what they wanted, how I felt beholden to Nick because of what he’d done for me, how I had done whatever I could to try and make her life easier during the siege too. I told her about Mike Quarry and Norm Otton and what little I knew then of Alvin Hayward. I tried to explain to her that I wasn’t a significant member of the American Reclamation, that I was as much going along as anything else and the entire time I said it, I felt as if I was as much trying to absolve myself. But I closed with, “Yes, I’ve been working them. He,” by which I meant Nick, “is doing what he thinks is right.”

“They’re terrorists,” she said.

“One man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.”

“That’s a bullshit copout and you know it. They spend all their time convincing themselves that the world is against them, that it’s too ‘PC’ or there were some good old days. But it’s bullshit. They want power. You don’t see that?”

“Nick had power,” I said. “He was in Congress.”

“That’s never enough power for some people.”

“It was for him, until Tavish shot Sunter. Blew a hole in his head live on national television. Remember?”

Of course she did. It was an indelible image. Those that didn’t see it live looked it up on the internet, their curiosity morbid enough so as to be irresistible. And if they hadn’t, they knew the what happened at a gruesome level of detail: Sunter shuffles his papers at the desk, his mouth beginning to open to say his first line about a Christian police officer suing the state in a discrimination lawsuit, a context mostly forgotten because off-screen someone begins to shout and a producer, thinking it’s going to go viral, be a huge ratings bump for Fox News, thinking this plays right into a narrative of upset, angry liberals who would shout down a TV host for talking about the War on Christianity, this producer has a camera pan over to the man, to Tavish in a jacket with the hood down and his face visible as he rises from the crowd and ignores those who would shout him down, ignores their looks and stares. What he shouts is indistinct. It is just the face of a black, middle-aged man, weatherworn and scarred at the lip. The camera jumps back to Sunter, and in the cut misses Tavish dragging the handgun from the pouch

of his hood, and the operator is steady, never loses focus, as if he has decided that Yes, we must see, and the Glock illegally bought, smuggled into Chicago and then the companion that proves premeditation as it travels with Tavish to New York, it barks a single round. Sunter's head does something strange. A red spot appears at the front of his face, on his forehead just above his right eye, before the back of his head goes. As if his body, in this catastrophic failure, ejects as much brain as it thinks it can save. The gray matter, which isn't gray but more of a heather blush and hardly looks like matter when it falls with a wet slump against the shiny black studio floor, is what gets me. That's where I have to stop watching or risk vomiting. But after, there isn't much to see anyway. The camera doesn't turn away from Sunter, but the camera operator and the producers run towards the body and more shots sound off screen. It usually cuts there, misses Tavish shooting a security guard and an assistant, both nonfatal injuries, as he flees onto the streets of New York City, somehow escapes the dragnet cast by the police, and confesses to the murder and posts a liberal manifesto on YouTube from the house he will shoot at police and still be taken alive from, the old wooden farmhouse near Pelham, Massachusetts.

“I know what you're talking about. Sure, there are people in there that are paranoid, some who are violent. But that's not most of them, right? It isn't just that these people want to challenge the government. They see it as the only way.”

“But it isn't,” said Beth.

“But we don't change. It's all partisan gridlock. We demonize, we lionize, and there's no middle ground. I'm so fucking sick of absolutism.”

“Me too. But I didn’t imprison a city to whine about it.”

“I trust Nick,” I said. “I do.”

“That’s great for you, but you’re willing to let him, let them, disrupt our lives because you trust your old college buddy? We’re hostages. We have our food rationed. We can’t go anywhere. People are terrified. Look around you. Do you not see how wrong this is?”

“They think they’re fighting for your rights.”

“They’re not. People who fucking shove fliers in my door during an election year, they’re fighting for my rights. These people are maniacs, James.” She stood, crossed over to me. Her warm hand cupped my cheek. “They’re dangerous. They’re going to get you killed.”

“I’m going to be fine,” I said. “We are.”

“There isn’t a we.” The hand withdrew.

“Beth, I’m sorry for what happened.”

“You attacked me.”

“It sounds stupid, but I was trying to protect you. If you tell anyone about what I’m doing, if anyone finds out, I am going to go to jail when this is all over. Or worse. It’s slim, but there’s still daylight for me now.”

“I’m not going to talk, James.”

“I miss you. It’s a lonely city.”

“That’s the line you’re going to use?”

“No,” I said. I grabbed her hand. She started to pull back, but relaxed. “I just need a friend to help get me through this. Someone to keep my head on straight. I don’t think I can trust Nick to do that. Will you help me?”

Beth nodded. “I can do that.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you later.” I squeezed her hand. I went back up to the apartment. There was work to be done and I wanted to be alone again.

Over the next five days, besieged life as I knew it seemed to return to normal. Even though I could tell she was trying, Beth was still uneasy around me. She seemed to be slowly rebuilding her tolerance. If that was the case, it was good we reestablished the pattern of our days: in the morning, we hung out and talked or played games, ate lunch. She’d leave before Norm and Quarry came by to run me to the studio, which had become an everyday-thing, which I mostly wrote off to Nick checking on me. I cranked out work for them at a steady clip. Quarry liked to pass on any compliments I’d received. Once, we heard them talking about my artwork on that radio station, some nasally-voiced caller complaining about police arresting a man who’d hung up my posters inside a subway station in New York. That was the fifth day.

The sixth day, Norm and Quarry both seemed strung like bows. Ready to fire if plucked, dangerous. Neither let me turn on the radio. They took me to the studio, left, and were late coming back. No conversation on the ride home. Just a pregnant, strange silence.

Beth agreed to have dinner with me one week after our talk. As I set water on the stove to boil, I heard a car pull up. I ran to the window, slid open the blinds. Only one side

of the car opened and the man who exited wasn't the right size for Quarry. I told Beth to go and hide under the bed, to stay there until she was absolutely sure no one was in the apartment. She sprinted to the bedroom. I waited for the moment that the door opened and made like I was exiting my office. Norm looked at me, nodded for me to come with him.

“What's wrong?”

“Emergency. Don't fuck around.”

“Sure.”

We drove straight to a nondescript strip mall and parked around the back of a building. I followed Norm down a grungy set of stairs and into a Chinese restaurant I'd never known about. There must have been nearly fifty people in the place. Some...well, some were children. They played with one another in a back corner of the restaurant, screeching with glee occasionally. A handful of other people on the other side of the room seemed afraid, constantly turning to look at whomever spoke and slinking away when people walked near. Obviously not American Reclamation members.

Al passed by me and nodded as he went, and Norm followed him back towards a door marked for staff only. I found a place to sit not far from the exit and sat. Quarry came and sat with me, but he didn't talk. In fact, he looked anxious. And that made me anxious. Before I could ask why, that back staffroom door opened and Norm and Al came out. Al headed to a small sound booth and took out a microphone.

“Hey, y'all, listen up,” he said. When the sound didn't quell he beat the head of the mike into his thigh. “I need to tell you two important things and then people got

places to be, so let's make this nice and fast. First, there were casualties in Rock Hill tonight. Now, y'all know that's in South Carolina. They were working on some action there and ran into the local police department. We don't know how many dead versus wounded and whatnot, but we're not worrying about that right now. The good news out of it is that the army is now looking behind them, thinking we've got people slipping through.

“Next thing, and this is the one you got to listen up on. We've had reports of a lot of people on the campuses of UNCC and at Northlake Mall. Now, both those places are pretty close to the I-485 loop, so we need to check things out and make sure it's just vagrants or something else and not a popup staging ground. Our drone reconnaissance hasn't told us its anything to get too excited over, but even if it's just vandals, we've got to divert some bodies. So a few of you are going to have smaller details, some of you are going to lose your details entirely. I promise we'll keep you safe until you get them back. We've made plans for everyone.”

Quarry patted me on the back. “We're going to be off you for a while. Come with me.”

We went out through the kitchen and towards the center of the stripmall's parking lot. It was a humid night and cloudy. Not much moon. And no streetlamps or anything. Quarry led with a flashlight, and when he shined it ahead, onto a shape in the dark the light exploded into starburst. A mirrored car, not the one I usually rode in. When the light shone down to its tires, the car only reflected shadows.

“You’re going to have to take care of yourself for a few days, maybe a week,” Quarry said. “You’ll go on a schedule we set, to the studio and back to the apartment. That’s it. Someone else will come by the studio each day to pick up work you’ve done and make sure you’ve been there. If you need gas, and you shouldn’t since you shouldn’t be going nowhere, you will fill up at the CMPD depot. There’s directions to get there and protocol for that written up and in the glovebox.”

“Wow,” I said, acutely giddy. “Got it.”

“Good. Here, come around back. This duffel, it’s an emergency kit. Cell phone, if you call 9-1-1, it’ll go through like normal. There’s also a short-range walkie-talkie here. Keep it at the frequency it’s on, and it’s written on the bottom if you bump the dial. Charger is there. You charge it every night, in your bedroom. Somewhere where you’ll hear it if it goes off. Anything you don’t understand so far?”

“No, it’s pretty simple.”

He smiled. “Good, because here comes the big part. You have three flares and a flare gun.” He took out an orange pistol and cracked it open. “Load like this, shoot into the air. Only if you are being chased or about to die.” He tucked it back into the bag. “And you should only be in that position if you’ve used this.” He took out a small pistol and showed it to me. “You ever shot a gun before?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Really?” Quarry said incredulously.

“Yeah. My dad likes to shoot. He used to take me.”

“Good.”

As Quarry slammed the trunk shut, we heard footsteps behind us. Quarry flicked his flashlight up onto Norm's face. He looked like a horror movie victim in the bright light.

"Shut that shit off," Norm said. "And I'm seeing to remind you that I've said this is a terrible idea, letting him on a longer leash than he's already trying to hang himself with."

"Oh, thanks for the support, sunshine," I said.

In the dark, I never saw the fist. It hit me, glanced off my forehead. I staggered but didn't fall, but Norm followed with a push that send me sprawling towards the car, the asphalt shredding skin off my palms and wrists as I slid. Before I was up to defend myself Quarry charged Norm. Norm didn't take Quarry advancing seriously until it was too late and Quarry had wrapped him in a headlock. I thought the older man's skull might pop when Quarry flexed, but instead the younger, bigger man brought a knee into Norm's chest that send him down, sucking wind.

"You OK?" Quarry asked me.

"Fine."

"You OK?"

Norm coughed.

"Great." He took keys out his pocket, jangling in them his palm before he handed them to me. "You ought to get going. Straight home. We have a GPS tracker in that car."

I thanked him, got in. The car started and the vibration of the engine through the floor, the seat, the steering wheel—it was wonderful. I drove home, taking the longest

way I could think of that was still mostly direct. This car didn't bear a GPS; it couldn't, because that would mean someone from the outside might be able to access it. A unallowable vulnerability. So I drove without worry, parked in my second designated spot (my car, the keys to which Norm had taken from me day one of the siege, couldn't be moved from the main one) and went inside to take a couple of painkillers. Norm's blow mostly caught me just enough to kickstart a bitch of a headache.

Beth left a note on my bed, telling me she'd shut the water off and went back downstairs. Unless I left her a signal on the door or something, she'd see me tomorrow. I decided I wouldn't tell her about the car. It might be too much of a temptation for her. She might try to find a way to drive it straight out of the city. And—apart from the inherent danger of that—I couldn't let her leave. I found myself keenly aware of how much I needed Beth, in whatever capacity. Our friendship, relationship, whatever it was, was one of those odd creations of the siege, unduplicatable in real world conditions.

So for the next three days, Beth and I kept the same schedule, but after lunch I drove to the studio. But also, each of the next three days, I took the car out after dark. I drove the same route, stuck to the same idyllic streets flanked by the oaks, the white and red brick houses, the tupelos whose thick greenness flitted with the wind. I liked the path from Dilworth through Myers Park to Cotswald. Something like trailblazing got in my blood those nights, like I needed to express some primal gene to go out and explore, to discover. And those roads, perfect for it. Like remnants, like a world long past. Or, like gravity: I would drive around, aware of my surroundings and occasionally struck by something weightless, that foreign feeling—a lurch in the stomach—where the past life

of Charlotte ceased to matter and then I would swing the car, well over the futile speed limits, around a familiar bend and memory rushed back like that old familiar force. Or, a lesson I remembered from history: in 1590, John White returned to Roanoke Island and found only the word CROATOAN carved in a tree, without sign of the colony he'd left years before. When my history teacher taught us about it, she told us that no signs of violence had been found other than the one inflicted upon the tree, that the structures of the colonists' houses and forts weren't razed because they weren't there at all. There were no crosses, as White had instructed the settlers to carve if they were attacked. Nothing, save the single word. And I felt like White out in the city at night. Confused, bewildered by the familiar. Able to picture what should have been. People, other cars, the lights in homes and stores and streetlamps. Instead, there were the enigmatic symbols pieced together by familiar parts: the tree, the ripped bark, the shape of roughly hewn, but certainly English, letters; the signs on the schools, a coworker's house, traffic signals, my favorite restaurant.

The fourth night I drove further north. That old explorer's streak. Stupefying curiosity.

I kept the headlights on as I drove. If I ever saw another car, I flashed them in a pattern, something in Morse code that I never learned the meaning of and slowed for the other car to respond. I saw patrol cars maybe once a night on my illicit drives. They drove by without concern, except for the night I went to Plaza Midwood. I saw the lights coming down the road and flipped mine in signal, but the other car did not respond. The darkness on the road between us folded itself into a thinner and thinner band until our

lights met, and then we'd passed one another. I watched their taillights in the rearview mirror. It swung into the far right lane, and then it hooked back, as if it might turn to follow. The gun was tucked between the center console and the driver's seat. Easy to reach, but I didn't need it: the car turned down a street just before the light, heading down through one of the labyrinthine neighborhoods.

I headed back towards the apartment, my eyes mostly still on the rearview until I passed a car with its flashers on. There was a NO U-TURN sign at the next break in the median, and I disobeyed to swing my car around, pulling along the shoulder, behind the red SUV. Its hazards blinked even time. Through the windshield, I could see the dark slab of the hood, popped up. I didn't want to take the gun when I investigated; I believed that I was in more danger with the gun than without it, especially in the dark when an antsy American Reclamation member might not believe any credentials, not that I really had anything other than my word and the fact that I was in a mirror-plastered car. Instead, I slipped my hand around the pocketknife and took the flashlight from the glovebox.

Someone was around the front of the car, near the grill. Their shoes scraped as they moved.

"Hello?" I called.

The scraping stopped. After a minute, a woman leaned around from the front of the car, shielding her eyes from the glow of my headlights. She was tall. Her hair covered her shoulders in wild ringlets. "Who are you?"

"James. Are you OK?"

“They robbed me,” she said. I’d come close enough that I could see her clearly, or clearly as I could with some of her features washed out in the light. She had ruddy cheeks and a birthmark along the right side, covering the cheek and ear in a darker splotch. The shirt she wore was torn on one side at the collar, as if it’d tried to separate from someone holding on to it tightly. She had dirt on her palms as she held them up to me. “Please don’t come any closer,” she said.

“Yeah, sure.” I stopped. I slipped the knife into my palm, furtive as I could. “Who robbed you?”

“Those thugs. They just drove off.”

“What’d they take?”

“My purse and my jewelry. They threw my keys somewhere that way.”

“Muggers?”

“They were,” and she paused. “You’re not with them, are you?”

“Wha...” I caught on. “Oh, no. No, I’m not.”

“Thank god.”

“What’s your name?”

“Fiona. You said John, right?”

“James.”

“Right, sorry,” she said.

“I’m going to come closer if that’s OK.”

She nodded.

I came around and stood so she could turn away from the light and so that she could get a good look at me. She was in her 30s, tailing towards 40. Mousy face, pointed nose. “How come you have the hood popped up?”

“That’s why I stopped in the first place. Well, I ran out of gas. Tate, he...that’s the name of my car...”

“Tate?”

“It ran out of gas and started to shake. I didn’t want to hurt the engine or something, so I pulled over. But then they pulled up behind me and told me to pop the hood. They messed with something, like one of the hoses or something.”

I walked around to the front of the car, shining the flashlight across parts of the engine. I didn’t see anything amiss, but if someone reached down in there and yanked, they’d probably break something. But wouldn’t that be hot? I thought. I checked the driver’s side. The front tire had been gashed in the wall, deep enough to reveal its white-stitched innards. “And they threw your keys?”

“Yeah. Over there.”

“Can I ask why you were out?”

“You said you’re not with them, right?”

“No, no. I’m just rudely curious,” I told her.

She didn’t laugh. “I’d rather not say.”

I nodded. She had come around the front as well, her gaze transfixed on the hand with the pocketknife. “I understand. But those guys know you’re all alone here, out after

curfew. They might be back. Now, you can walk the way you came, but that's probably just as dangerous as driving. If not more."

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

"Tate's not going anywhere," I told her. "I can give you a lift to wherever this destination you won't tell me about is."

She looked at my car, then me. "It looks like one of theirs. The mirrors and everything."

"Boosted it," I told her. That was the best I had to make her trust me, but she either bought that or convinced herself that it was close enough to the truth or decided that it was a lie meant well enough and got in, or she walked. I gave her a minute to think. She tensed when I shuffled my weight from one foot to the other.

"OK," she said.

"OK." I walked her back to the car. Before she got in, before she could see clearly inside, I stashed the gun in the space between the door and my seat. I unlocked the door for her, started the car. "Where am I going?"

"6407 Pineburr Drive."

I realized I didn't know where that was.

"It's near McApline Creek Park."

I knew where that was, vaguely. My sense of direction wasn't strong, especially without a phone to give me turn-by-turn directions. I couldn't remember phone numbers or much complex math either.

At one point, when we came to an unclear intersection, I turned towards her. She was fingering her neck, near where it met the tear in her shirt. The skin looked purpled there. “Go straight,” she said. And other than her directions, we were mostly quiet. It wasn’t until I’d made two wrong turns that she laughed a little bit.

“You want to drive?” I said. I smiled at her.

“It’s OK.”

“So, what do you do, Fiona?” I wondered if that was an OK question to ask. The act of getting to know someone seemed verboten. But more than that, it seemed a dumb question to ask when most people hadn’t been to work in so long. They did nothing. They were fulltime, professional internees.

“I used to work for Bank of America. Not downtown or anything. Just as a teller. But saying I work for the company sounds more impressive. Though, it seems like everyone works for them here. It was a pretty dull job.”

“Well, you’re making up for it. Taking your car out at night in this city, that’s got some...”

“Balls?” she said.

“Balls.”

“Well, why are you out? Left, right up there.”

“Don’t you think it’s better if neither of us know why we broke curfew,” I told her.

“It’s not like you’re breaking the law.”

“Closest thing to it.”

“I don’t mind saying,” she said. “I promised a friend I’d look in on her once a week, to make sure she was OK. I’ve been going Sundays, at like four in the morning to not get caught. Taking the backroads and everything. But I didn’t have much gas left.”

“But you chanced it anyway.”

“I did,” she said. “Right here.” She pointed out her window to a house on the right. It was dark like every other place on the block.

“You’ll be all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” Something felt off. There were dying flowers peeking out around the unkempt hedges that flanked the walkway up to the door. It was a tiny place, worn on its face. Like the sad dollhouse of a poor girl. “Wait here for a minute. Let me pay you back,” she said.

“No, no worries.”

“No, I insist. I have money and ration cards.”

“It’s fine. I certainly don’t need those.” As soon as I said it, I wanted to crawl between the space of the seats and hide out forever, away from the queer look that crossed Fiona’s face, studying me. I made like I was scratching at the stubble on my chin, but really I was putting my hand near my mouth to make sure I could shut myself up. She smiled at me.

“OK. I’m still giving you something. Hold on.” The house stayed dark as she went inside, but after a minute I saw the small glow of a light, maybe a candle or a camping lantern, flash across the windows. She returned, opened the door, and set a bottle of wine on the seat. “It’s my last one.”

“Well, I definitely can’t take it then,” I said.

“Please, do.” She shut the door and walked back towards the house, watching me from the stoop with her arms crossed over her chest as I waved and drove off. There were no other cars on the road on my way back to the apartment. I took the wine and set it on the table. Beth and I could have it tomorrow. It might be something to get her closer to forgiving me, I thought. Wine and dinner. Something like we would really do if it wasn’t for the state of the city.

The rush of the night had convinced me not to take the car out anymore, not without reason. I went to my room and slept until Beth knocked on my door the next morning.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What are you doing?”

I glanced over at Beth, who'd stopped reading and set her book on the couch upside-down so its spine flexed. She came over. I said, “Work.”

“Oh...,” she said. She looked as if I'd just spoiled something in her.

“It's nothing,” I told her.

That piqued her interest, though. She bent over what I was doing with the lean of curious, perturbed teacher, hands resting on her knees. Investigating what I ought not be doing. I told her she was nosey and she nodded, asked what it was for. I told her that I thought there needed to be to see more pieces of positive art, morale boosters for within the city, and without. She huffed. “Just because it isn't for you,” I started, and then stopped because I'd been struck by an obvious idea, one that seemed half elementary, half gimmick, and somehow between that whole, genius. It might have ended up being everything but the last. “You'd make a great one-bodied focus group,” I said. “You consider yourself a Democrat, right?”

“Yes,” she said, her tone acerbic. “What do you call yourself, James?”

I had gone in the past with independent, but I'd also learned that was exactly the wrong word. That word might well have been magic, because applying it to myself had always made my telephone ring off the hook, morning, noon, and night, during election seasons. Robotic voices or nasally, unsure teenagers or suave and experienced marketers called again and again and again until I convinced them they'd convinced me to vote for

their candidate. They'd usually call a few extra times to be sure. It was too bad for them that I never voted. I'd given up on that because I hated the constant squabble, that intractable game, that self-inflicted war of attrition we call partisanship and the two-party system. It bothered me most—or I saw and hated it most clearly—when a friend had given my email to one of the party's congressional committees as a joke and they'd bombarded my inbox with pleas and dire headlines that this whole thing would go to hell if anyone other than their good friend, their husband, wife, their representative were elected, or if the other party continued to exist. There was so much sanctimony. No awareness that they were as bad, as awful, and that the merest hint of civility between parties might have made the system workable if boring. Like a see-saw, really. Either way, my father suggested and I eventually started telling callers I voted straight ticket to whatever party they were calling for and hung up before they managed to unspool their fundraising appeals.

“I'd say I'm an apathetic moderate. My parents used to call themselves moderates. They weren't, of course. But they wanted me to pick my own party. They thought it was unfair, or un-American, to be anything but moderate, or independent. Yet they voted for nearly every Republican on the ballot, now that I think about it,” I said. I showed her the poster more clearly. “So, here's what I got. Doing anything for you?”

“Nope,” she said.

“Drawing this city busted open like a piñata?”

“That's not going to work.”

“Not for them, anyway.”

“Well, what then?”

“I don’t know, James. What’s the positive to this?”

We were quiet for a long enough time that it became obvious neither of us had an answer.

“We can go negative,” I said.

“This early in the campaign?”

I laughed. “I mean, why are people so pissed off? Maybe that’s what we look for. What happened and what things were like before. Here,” I said, grabbing a piece of paper. “A list.”

“How far back are we going?”

“Ten years?”

We went back nearly 25. One thing seemed to lead to the next in that awful chain of history. Everything seemed more splitting than the thing we thought of before it.

Obama Elected	Belgium	Egypt Plane Bombing
Sunter Shot	9/11	Katrina
Benghazi	Michael Brown	Bin Laden
Charlie Hedbo	Eric Gardner	San Bernardino
Mizzou	Ferguson	London Riots
ISIS	Bundy Standoff	Great Recession
Clinton emails	Paris Attacks	TARP
IRS Audits	Iraq	Tea Party
Ground Zero Mosque	Baltimore	Charleston Massacre
Sandy Hook	Syria	Ben Carson
Virginia Tech	Malaysia Flights	Arab Spring
Aurora Theater	Clinton Elected	Bernie Sanders

Gabrielle Giffords	Gay Marriage	Scalia's Death
Iran Nuke Deal	Kim Davis	Flint, Michigan
NYC Hate Crimes	Global Warming	Panama Papers
Brewer Resigns	Hurricane Katrina	Sequestration
Syrian Civil War	Disputed	Goldman Sachs
Obamacare	Convention	NC HB2 Bathroom
Crimea	Donald Trump	Bill

Beth called it quits after about a half-hour. "You're right. Please go positive," she said.

"Yeah. I'm working on it," I muttered.

"It'd give people something."

"In this place you love so much?"

Then, from the apartment below, came a loud banging. It stopped for a moment and then, as if the lull had been to gather all its strength, a thunderclap.

"Is she mad at me again?" I asked.

Beth led the way downstairs at an urgent clip. We heard one more thud, this one different from the others and distinct: the sound of a body hitting the ground, and hard. Beth flung open the door and went to her aunt. I grabbed the landline off the wall, dialing 9-1-1 and stepping around its knotty cord to watch Beth checking to make sure her aunt was awake. She was, but not nearly lucid. Her lips moved in indiscriminate patterns, never forming words. I realized there was no dial tone. I tried again, slapping down the switchhook and dialing and fucking nothing, even though 9-1-1 was supposed to work. I hung up and tried again. This time, there was a busy signal. It cut out after a second.

“James,” Beth said. “What do we do?”

I ran back upstairs for my keys and went to the car for the emergency phone. I called Quarry.

“She looks bad. I’m going to drive her,” I told him.

“Do not do that, James,” Quarry said. His voice was emphatic.

“Why? No, there’s no time. Do I just take her to CMC?”

“Do not drive her. I’ll be there. Just get her outside.”

Ms. Gallot’s eyes couldn’t focus on me. Beth bore most of the weight, her aunt constantly slouching to that side as we dragged her, me sometimes pushing at the fatty back of her knees with my legs or reaching down to move them manually like a puppeteer repositioning a doll. We got her out into the overcast afternoon and sat her on the bottom walkway step. Beth sat behind her, propping up the woman with her knees. It’d been showers on and off all day and the sidewalk was slick, so we didn’t try to go further until the car, dazzling with its rain-pelted mirrors, pulled up. Quarry got out and helped me tug the woman up and towards the front seat, fighting gravity and the halting momentum of her body. When she was in, Beth and I crawled in the back and Quarry sped towards Carolina Medical Center.

“I tried to call 9-1-1, but it wasn’t working,” I told him.

Quarry handed me the phone. “Call A-1 in the phonebook and tell him everything.

I did. On the other end of the line, Alvin Hayward growled and swore and asked a few questions that I didn't understand, mostly about where we were and what was going on as we drove, and then he hung up.

At the hospital, Beth and Quarry worked on getting Ms. Gallot out of the car while I ran in and found a skeleton crew of doctors and orderlies, all looking a bit gaunt and purplish around the eyes. One ran out a wheelchair to meet Beth. Two militiamen with their hands on their guns had been milling around the door; they followed me out as I trailed the nurse. They fell back toward the door again when they saw the car. Quarry and one of them traded a slack-armed salute before we all went inside. The nurse with Ms. Gallot led the way, winding through halls to the emergency department and straight back into a room where a doctor joined in getting Ms. Gallot settled on a hospital bed.

"Thanks," I told Quarry. He nodded. "I'll call in a few hours, let you know how she is."

"Don't," he said. "It's fine." He started a fast walk that broke into a jog, headed out the way we came.

Beth pulled in an extra chair for me after the doctor hustled out. He was anomalous, standing out for how quick he moved in the otherwise calm ward. It wasn't much busier than the few times I'd been for myself (food poisoning, broken toe) or with friends (appendicitis, car accident, severed fingertip while cutting a bagel). And the doctor was back in a moment with a nurse, standing over Ms. Gallot and reading something from the way she laid there, barely moving. The nurse drew blood from a thin vein. Ms. Gallot was lapsing more significantly in and out of consciousness.

I grabbed Beth's hand.

"Do you need to go back to the apartment?" she asked.

"No."

She squeezed my fingers.

After a while, once it seemed things had started to settle and medicines I couldn't pronounce had been administered, my intense anxiety about emergency departments—really any hospital room, actually—became overwhelming enough for me to need a walk. Beth had fallen asleep in her chair, so I got her a blanket from a nurse and tucked her in as best I could before I started to wander. I walked around the ward and throughout the other wards. Some corridors on the upper floors were dark and whole sections empty, eerily shadowcast and strange without bodies in the beds or people at the nurse stations, the offices, anywhere. Nobody was hanging out in orthopedics. I saw three babies wriggling and kicking under yellow blankets and wailing against their new lives. A happy father pressed his hand against the glass. He tensed, watched me closely as I walked by.

There wasn't much in the way of security or anyone who seemed to pay much attention to me as I walked and walked, traversing most of the hospital campus. I had to have been gone for at least an hour before I came back to the lobby, settled enough to find and wait with Beth. An American Reclamation member stopped me as I came in, though. "Where you off to?" he asked.

"E.R."

"For yourself?"

"No," I said.

He scrutinized me. “You came in earlier, right?”

“Yes. I came in with,” I paused, unsure if mentioning Quarry’s name was wise, and instead settled on, “I came in with one of your guys.”

“Well, you should get back to your wife, then.” The way he said it, there was something I wasn’t getting. I pressed, asking him if something had happened. He shook his head, not like *no*, but like *I can’t talk about it*. Another militiaman came around the corner and asked if everything between us was OK. Before the other one could answer, I jumped on it and said I’d heard something happened and wanted to know if we’d be safe in the hospital. The new guy said that’d we’d be fine, that they’d caught some teenagers vandalizing a 9-1-1 call center not too far away. They’d been caught, though, and it was resolved. I nodded like I knew or expected all of it, hoping the man who’d interrogated me earlier wouldn’t get suspicious about how I’d cut him off. But he must not have known the result yet. Relief washed over his face.

“I ought to get back,” I said, and turned down the hall. I stopped at the nurse’s station to talk to the doctor. Ms. Gallot had gone into a diabetic crisis, primarily because she’d been using the wrong insulin dose, the one we’d stolen from Terrance’s place. She was dehydrated, too, and they’d already given her a saline bag. “I can give you some insulin,” the doctor said, frowning with the gravity of his tone. “But I can’t promise you won’t be in here again if this goes on a while.”

“That bad?”

The doctor looked past me to the shuffling of a paramedic team hopping into their rig, their radios squawking about the call. An American Reclamation member leaned

against a nearby doorframe, and played a Gameboy. But, of course, the doctor seemed to be doing nothing too, the way emergency doctors often are, and with nonchalance. Never mind they were actually confirming a lifesaving diagnosis. They had illusory idleness. “We’re overworked and understaffed, though we have most of the medicine we need. It’s probably not as bad as you expect.” He slid off his stethoscope and held it behind his back, pulling the band back to stretch his arms, his wingspan still coiled at the shortness of the cords. The spidery wrinkles of his face spread weblike to his jowls as he grimaced. Down the hall, someone, a man, groaned out in a deep, guttural pain. The doctor looked at the nurse. He shrugged, not saying *we don’t have anything for him* but meaning it. The doctor looked back at me. “You know what it is—what it is, you know, is every day here now is like a really shitty day was before. One really bad one after another. Though I’ll say that we get a lot less drunks and druggies and nuisance calls.” He stood, walked with me towards Ms. Gallot’s room. We stopped outside the door. “I haven’t been home in a few days—they make me sleep here in the bunkrooms, and they watch my house so they know where I am most of the time. Romantic, I know. But I know my neighbors were afraid to leave their houses. And no one is going to call an ambulance when they don’t know who’ll show up driving the thing. I heard one guy on my block...” and there his voice trailed off as he decided he better not say. He looked around suspiciously, suddenly a bit red in the face. He reminded me of those nice-looking people interviewed for postgame terror reports, the cameras too close to their faces as they told, relived, sold, their harrowing experiences. Those stories always preceded the heroics, the home remedies and bonding together of people, that resilient and shared humanity. But there

wasn't any of that yet, and the doctor didn't have any to share. There was just awestruck victimhood.

I thanked him and sat in the uncomfortable chair next to Beth for another couple of hours before Ms. Gallot was ready to be released. One of the guards told us he'd drive us out in one of the ambulances, a paramedic driving and another sitting in the back. They brought Ms. Gallot to her bed in the back of her apartment on a stretcher. I thanked them, and they drove off back to that lonely hospital. Beth asked me to stay with them for a while, just to make sure things were OK. While I was cooking dinner, someone knocked sharply on the door.

"Hide," I told Beth, and she was already moving down the hall. I heard a door close, probably a closet. I checked the peephole. Quarry stood there, hands on his hips.

"Come on in," I said as I opened the door.

"How's the old lady?"

"She'll live," I said.

"Glad to hear."

I heard Beth come out. I wanted to tell her to stay out of sight, though I didn't know why. It didn't make much sense, but the idea settled in my gut, weighted like a bezoar. She wouldn't have listened anyway; she walked past me and hugged Quarry.

"Thank you," she said.

"Of course."

"Stay for dinner?"

"No. I should..."

“Please,” she said.

“Come on,” I added. My anxiety was unrelenting, but Beth looked so earnest.

And Quarry looked like hell. He kept rubbing at his right temple, seemed exhausted. “She won’t ask any questions. Just food.”

“I owe you,” she said.

“Who’s cooking?”

“James. It isn’t as bad as it sounds.” She hugged me tightly, her arms belted around my waist. I kissed her on the head. Everything felt normal. We were happy.

“I can stay,” Quarry nodded.

I finished cooking while Beth set places. Quarry hung out at the threshold to the dining room with a soda and asked Beth about herself, her classes. Her life. When we all sat together, cutting into our chicken in silence, he broke it by asking how we’d hooked up.

“He hit on me at the postbox.”

“I asked how you were doing,” I said.

“He literally batted those long eyelashes at me,” she said.

“I bet.”

Beth took a drink from her water glass. “Can I ask about you?”

Quarry nodded like he was working out a crick in his neck.

“What’d you do before this?”

“Stationed at Fort Bragg.”

“So military to this.” She wasn’t asking.

“I heard about the American Reclamation through a friend of a friend. He showed me how to access some of their message boards and stuff through Tor sites. And I liked the people I started to meet. They aren’t bad people. I know you might think otherwise, but they aren’t. And I don’t think I’m a bad person. I just thought that this was the best way to make things better in a reasonable amount of time.”

“I hope it’s worth it,” Beth said.

“Changing the subject,” I said, taking more of the fresh asparagus that somehow had made its way to me, through what I could only assume blessed and divine intervention. “What do you guys miss?”

“Freedom,” Beth said. She looked up from her plate and as she did the smirk fell off her face, some sudden complication in it, some thought that crossed her mind and didn’t lead where she wanted it to, I guessed. She pushed her chair out and went to the kitchen to get something to drink. Quarry, on the other end of the table, looked closely at his food.

“Television for me, man,” he said. “Netflix too. I’m going to be so far behind on all my shows. They’ve all just gone on without me.”

“You sound like my aunt,” Beth called from the kitchen.

“Wait, there’s no TV there,” I said.

“Back bedroom.”

“Who doesn’t own a TV nowadays?” Quarry said, shaking his head at me.

For the rest of dinner, we reminisced about what we yearned to have back. It felt like old friends discussing past fads, things that weren’t cool or didn’t exist anymore. The

behind the scenes of every apocalyptic story is the longing for what was. The good, even the bad.

Quarry and Beth hugged again as he left. She locked the door behind him and cuddled with me on her aunt's couch. In the morning, I would have to go out to get food on my own. We'd overused our rations for dinner, and her aunt's diet would have to be more carefully managed. But for a long time, we didn't talk about that. We just sat. And then Beth squeezed my hand and asked, "How much longer?" And then, she cried.

I drove the car and parked in the far part of the parking lot across the street from the grocery store. Beth had asked to come, but I'd insisted that she'd stayed at the apartment to take care of her aunt. But flashes of anxiety bit at me as I walked towards the crosswalk. The store I'd decided to go to wasn't the closest one to me; I didn't want to bump into anyone who lived in the apartment complex, who might have seen the mirror-decked car or Quarry draw down on Beth and her aunt in the garden. So I went to the one I usually went to, an open-all-night one on Colony where, before the siege, I did my shopping late at night or early in the morning with a zombie-like shamble, a pecking and insomniac one, wandering the aisles. Some nights I didn't see any other shoppers, and if the self-checkout machines were still open, I never had to interact with another human being. After the siege started, my food and living supplies were delivered to me according to a list I left. The list sometimes was impacted by ration rules, but generally I got what I wanted. I thought about food less than I had before.

The line started at the door and came in a long stretch of people, hugging the brick façade of the building at least half its considerable length. As I added myself to the

end, I tried to make note of how other people did things. They mostly kept their heads down, didn't talk. How would I get my groceries back? Steal a cart? Everyone else seemed to lug out the brown paper bags in nearly-overloaded armfuls. The woman in front of me, a bit older than me, with bleached-blond hair and a clutch purse stuffed in the front pocket of a faded black hoodie it was too hot to be wearing, beaten shoes, beaten jeans ripped along the knees and paint splotch patches at the hip and shins, sometimes whistled a bit of a tune. But she stopped as soon as anyone looked at her. She was the only one I saw, other than myself, that didn't stand out as being with a family or a group of three or four adults together. I spent about half an hour behind her before we came near the automatic doors, which had been set permanently open via a train of interlocked shopping cars in front of each door. It rattled like chains each time the doors made their little futuristic whoosh and tried to close. It started to drive me insane after a few minutes. I didn't know how the pair of kids, fifteen, maybe sixteen, and holding hunting rifles while looking as bored as teenagers always do, could stand it.

They signaled for two large families to enter, and the line inched forward until the woman ahead was waiting next to the carts. She kept her head down and, when she thought no one was watching, put her hood up over her face. I turned my gaze from her back to the teenagers with their weapons, fascinated at how they stood there.

“What are you looking at?” asked one.

I snapped my head up, realizing the position I'd put myself in. “Just not used to shopping with guns, still,” I said. I started to smile, but when the younger one didn't

flinch I felt a chill that ran straight down my spine. The woman in front of me turned and cocked her head, curious now.

Another family left the store, and then another.

“OK, come on in. You two and all the way down to you in the black there.”

The woman snatched my hand. Both guards ignored us walking by and her fingers were starting to loosen from mine when a guard, further back in the store entrance said, “Hold up. Let me see your list, man.”

“I...”

“No, I brought it, honey. Right here.” The woman passed over a slip of paper. The boy looked it over, then waved towards the interior of the store. An older man who wore a pistol on his hip approached and took out a sharpie to cross out a couple things near the top and then passed it back. He nodded for us to go ahead, and the woman and I headed for the baked goods. When we were far enough away not to be overheard and mostly out of sight, behind a half-empty snack display case, her hand freed itself from mine and latched onto my forearm, nails digging in. “You don’t have your list? Are you fucking stupid?” She went into her clutch and pulled out a little pad and a pen, jabbed both of them at me. “Here, write something in case you get checked.”

“I didn’t know there were....” I smiled, thanked her. “I’ll be more careful. I’m sorry.”

“What’s your name?”

“James,” I told her.

“Susan. If they ask about my husband, I’m calling for you. OK?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Don’t fuck around with these people, James. I’m telling you. I don’t know what the hell you’ve got going on, but they don’t care. These people will hurt you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I really appreciate it.”

She patted me on the arm and walked away.

I scribbled down what I had come for, the list that Beth had drilled into my head of everything we both needed for the next few days, as I started to walk around the store, wandering a bit like I usually would. Everyone around me moved with more purpose, eyes always on one of three things: the food, the floor, or the guns. Whenever I made eye contact with someone, they looked away. After a few minutes, I started to feel nervous about it, anxious that someone might single me out. So I followed their pattern, mostly: food, floor, guns. And as far as food went, the store was better stocked than I had expected. I’d been anticipating something of a wasteland, the bare bones of shelves everywhere. There were a few holes, and the rows didn’t seem quite as deeply stocked. It reminded me more of the market my parents owned than the grocery stores I was used to. It didn’t seem to quite be a supermarket anymore, but there was something... refreshing in that. The aisles weren’t walls bricked out by 1,000 different sized and branded boxes or the rainbows of glinting aluminum foil. It seemed more reasonable. Enough food that we could eat as a community. And people kept their old shopping habits alive. They waited impatiently in line, they left their carts in the middle of the aisles, moved from right to left, up and down and then doubled back for whatever they’d missed. Their kids paused in front of the kaleidoscopic cereal boxes and cookie packages with their stupid,

smiling mascots. Mothers pulled them back with stern looks and terse, disapproving words.

There was a crowd in the aisle of toiletries and a guard holding a baton keeping watch. I tried to brush through the disorganized line, jostling a woman whose face was obscured by a floppy sunhat. She turned and her mouth went from grimace to wide, bright smile.

“James?”

“Yvette?” I said. She hugged me. She wore the same perfume she did at the office, and I loved the familiar scent. Something beyond what I could recognize, but it made me take a deep breath and laugh. The man who’d been bending down in front of her, looking at something in their shopping basket, stood and turned. “Hey, Kyle. Hell, how are you guys?” I stuck an arm out from hugging his wife to shake his hand.

“I’m so glad you’re alright,” Yvette said. She held me at arms’ length to give me a motherly one-over. That reminded me to ask where their daughter was. I didn’t see her with them. “She stays with our neighbor while we shop. Then when they shop, we watch their kids. Shifts.” I understood without her saying much more that she was afraid having Kayla here would put her, or them, somehow in danger. Attract attention to them. “How are you? Have you had any trouble?”

“No, no,” I told her. “I’m OK.”

“Thank god. You know, you were the one I was most worried about.”

“Me?”

Kyle spoke up: "I heard that people that might be able to fight back, like those without kids and families, they're disappearing."

"I haven't heard that," I said.

"Yeah. A friend of a friend who's not around anymore, stuff like that," Kyle said. He was naturally pale, but now it seemed lighter, more permanent. He checked where the guard was again, his lips pursing as if he was still worried, afraid but not with any urgency. Like he'd been so scared for so long that it settled tiredly on his face.

"It's probably just a rumor, something made to scare us. Keep us in line. I've been fine. No trouble at all. Are you guys having any trouble?"

"Just the usual, with toilet paper and stuff," Yvette said.

"It's all bullshit," Kyle said.

Yvette's hand snapped her hand over his mouth. It made a wet noise that caused a few people to turn in our direction. "Shh," she said.

Kyle glowered at her. "Fuck'em. I don't care," he said, his voice a whisper. Yvette coiled her arms around him. "I'm sorry. I'll shut up," he said.

"Has there been any trouble for y'all?" I asked.

"Not really. Things have been OK for us. But there's stories. You hear'em when you catch the chance to talk with someone who doesn't live next door or whatever. It's so rare that we see someone like you, someone we know," Yvette said. "We've been trying to find someone who's heard from my mom. She lives off Independence, like two miles down that way but she might as well be on Mars for all we've been able to find out. It's impossible."

“But you said the kids are OK?”

“Well, the blackouts scare Gabby. She’s at that age for monsters under the bed. But we can’t put a nightlight or anything that’ll stay on or turn on the lights for her.”

I shook my head.

“One of us usually just sits in bed with her. Use a candle. But you, you’re well?”

“Promise,” I said.

“OK. We need to get back. Line’s been longer than usual today. You take care of yourself,” Yvette said. I noticed the pen-chewing guard was at the end of the aisle, maybe watching us. They headed one way and I went the other, away from the guard. I pulled out my ration booklet and looked through the cherry-red perforated cards. Something about them reminded me of carnival coupons, and each one had stamped the original 13-star flag, bore their denomination in the top left and bottom right corners. I’d brought the whole \$200 that had been deposited on my doorstep a week ago, though I had probably a small fortune in excess from all the paydays before, every other week. They’d divided up the city so that there was a staggered schedule to prevent a run on anything.

Checking my fake list again, I went back through the aisles and actually grabbed what I needed. I had to shrug my way through a cluster of people loitering around a coffin-container of roasts, which seemed to me like an odd leftover. But there it was, and as I grabbed one I heard mid-distant screaming and shouting and then like the slap of wet skin. Near the dairy cases, two men had thrown a young man to the ground and fallen on him, their arms and fists rising up like crests and down like hammers, legs flopping and kicking against the floor, wriggling to get enough purchase to rein their knees under them

enough to send a knee into the pinned man. His hands, dark and flailing, tried to cover his face. Other American Reclamation members joined in, one of them pulling a basketball shoe off the kicking foot and throwing it away. Another slipped on the tile and toppled a shopping cart, spilling the contents aside like some gluttonous pre-cooked meal's retching. It clattered like a dozen bells. The men tired, slowed. The back wheel of the cart, stuck in the air, listed pathetically back and forth on a squeaking hinge.

No one else ran towards the fight. In fact, there may have been a collective backing away.

The last two men who'd run up to help weren't interested in the fight at all. Their handguns pointed at us.

"They're going to kill him," someone said. And what he meant was, We should do something. But we didn't. The militiamen extricated themselves from the dogpile, hoisted the man they'd beaten. His neck was slack, chin against his chest, and the blood from his face dripped down to his dirty shirt and jeans with the knees worn through as they started to walk him towards a rear door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. It felt like, just before he went through the door, he tried to look up at us who'd watched the spectacle and even though I couldn't be sure he'd made a conscious movement, couldn't be sure if he even was conscious, I felt some sort of accusatory stare. My arms prickled with gooseflesh. I turned and looked back at all of us who'd done nothing. Towards the rear of the crowd was Fiona. She saw me as well.

"How are you?" she asked when I made my way to her.

"OK," she said. There were still some marks on her.

“Your car still stranded?”

“It is as far as I know. Not that it bothers me, of course. Who’s going to tow it? There’s nothing wrong with me just leaving it there. Besides, if it’s meant to be, she’ll wait for me.”

“That’s faithful,” I said.

“Isn’t it, though?”

“Speaking of missing, where’s your cart?”

“What?”

“Your cart,” I said. “Your shopping cart.”

“Oh, shit. I left it when I heard all the commotion. Shit, shit.” She turned and ran towards one aisle, pivoted, and went back down another. No cart. She stopped and tousled her hair with her hand with a frustrated scratching. “Damn it. It’s gone. Damn it. And I had the last bottle of my conditioner in there too. I’ll have to go up front and grab another one. Can I ask you to walk with me? The guys up front, they’ve made me nervous today. They seem worse than usual,” she said. “Please, walk with me, James.”

“Yeah, but you should know I’ve already gotten married once today.”

“What?”

I told her about the girl in line.

“You’re an idiot, James. Sorry, I know. I know, I know I don’t know you all that well, but how could you be so stupid? It’s like you don’t know any better.”

I was quiet for a moment, not planning to answer until she turned and looked at me with expectation. “I don’t know.” My brain raced for another lie. “I forgot. My brain said, ‘We’re going grocery shopping.’ I just forgot the rules were different now.”

Fiona smiled unpleasantly. “It’s so bad.”

“Worse. I thought things were OK, that it was a little rough here and there. But what they did to that guy? Did you even see him do anything?”

“All these men are are bullies. We’re just here to watch and play victim.” She wrenched a cart free from the corral. “Unlucky us, huh?”

Sometime while we looped through the store and Fiona recollected what she’d lost, we started talking about what places in the city would be most interesting to visit without anyone there, where the coolest haunts in this new ghost town would be. When she mentioned Freedom Park, I almost slipped and told her what it was like, how quiet and peaceful. I suggested the college, and she said she thought it wouldn’t be too different than any winter vacation. We agreed that anywhere sports-related was probably eerie: BB&T Park, the Time Warner Cable Arena. I joked that the Hornets should be used to having no one there. Bank of America Stadium, with all that wide green grass and empty seats seemed the most terrifying.

“Where else?” I said.

“Southpark Mall.”

“EpiCentre.”

She slapped me on the arm. “That was my trump card. Right in the center of the city, that whole plaza with no one there. Every time I go it’s so crowded. I’d kill to...”

and her voice trailed off as she looked at the boxes of pasta, her finger vaguely pointing, hovering over until it snapped up the one she wanted, like some wiry bird plucking a fish from the water.

“You’d kill to?”

“You have a car and you aren’t afraid to drive. Or maybe you’re same as me and enjoy making decisions that risk getting you shot if you’re caught. I’ve wanted to go and see Uptown. I want to take my camera and take some photos to document the way the city looks now. That’s actually where I was going the other night. I was going to stash my car in the bus depot and walk.

“There’d be enough places to hide if someone came by, all those garages and the walkways and alleys. I just had to get into the city. Without my car, I thought that couldn’t happen, but—but now, James, we could do it together. You have to be curious.”

“That sounds insane,” I said.

“James.” She clutched my arm. “Can I tell you something, something I don’t really tell people? I hate my job. I hate my life, really. I don’t want to work in a bank. I want to be a photojournalist. I’ve done some local work and stuff, but...if I could do this? I would be in for wherever I want to work. This would give me a career. Come on, James. I love insane. I know this is a dangerous, stupid idea. But we can be the people who become famous for recording what’s going on. We only have to go once, get the pictures and then bail. We’ll make a fortune selling them later. And think about it: if we’re the only ones brave enough to do it, we could easily become famous.”

“Or we could be shot.”

“This Civil War needs a Matthew Brady, James.”

I thought about it. Fiona was right, probably. But moreover, if I took Fiona and there was trouble, I would just piss off Nick. If she went alone, she might die.

“Fine. I will pick you up tomorrow night at ten.”

“No. Too soon. They might be doing increased patrols near my house because they saw my car. Let’s do it Thursday. Four days.”

“Fine. Four days.”

“It’s a date, James. See you later,” Fiona said as she wrote her address on a scrap of paper and handed it to me. I pocketed it. “You should go checkout. You’ve been in here awhile and they might get suspicious soon.” And she walked off down the largely empty frozen food aisle while I headed to the checkout where all the registers were manned, some by people wearing the store uniforms and others by American Reclamation members. Just before I could pull my cart I behind an older couple, another militia member stopped me. His lip puffed out from his tobacco dip and teeth inside looked like shadows of what should have been in there. Either the guy needed a haircut or someone had recently given the guy a buzzcut perfectly on the line between military and skinhead. He said, “Something’s wrong right here.”

“I followed the ration guidelines, I said.

“Naw. He flipped over a pack of deli meat in my cart. “Those posters ain’t right anymore.”

“I haven’t heard otherwise and I followed them to the letter.”

The man leaned his porcine face towards me, put his hand on me. Fat fingertips dug into the flesh below my collarbone, dipping my body to the one side. “Maybe I can look the other way on that you can’t read or follow directions. Say, fifty.”

“Fifty?”

“Fifty, cash. I don’t take any of that extra monopoly money-looking shit.” He paused. “Sorry.”

“I only have ration cards on me,” I said, digging into my pocket and pulling out a few. He took them and tore them up, dropped them so they fell in a pathetic pile of confetti next to his shoe. A few other shoppers stopped to watch our negotiation, almost in shifts: they realized after a few minutes that they didn’t want the attention currently stuck on me to be on them, so it was best to get on their way.

Americans aren’t skilled in the art of bribery on a personal scale. We can run political machines, embezzle, extort for policy. Hike up the price of a medication by a thousand percent, charge more for lead-tainted or irradiated water, whatever large scale scandal that has its roots in greed, we can do that. But we suck at graft. It’s in every movie, where someone has to learn how to palm someone a twenty dollar bill for a reservation or learn the secret code words for some special deal. We’re naturally bad at it, perhaps because we’re so bombastic and open about everything else. I tried, though, my voice not quite inspiring any sort of confidence that I was going to stick to my guns. “I can get you cash,” I said. “But twenty.” More pressure on my collarbone. I wondered if I’d end up like the guy near the milk coolers. “OK. Fifty.”

“Good.”

“You’re going to keep an eye on my stuff?”

“I’ll even make sure your milk is still cold,” he said.

I slipped out of the store and went back to my car. I kept a small fold of twenties in a little slit along my car’s roof upholstery, something my father insisted on in case I was ever in a pinch. It might have been the only cash I had, since I lived and died by swipes, especially in economic matters.

At the entrance to the grocery store I flashed the cash to each guard, pointing towards the man inspecting the checkout items each time. “I’m guessing you don’t make change,” I said when I handed him sixty. He laughed and pushed my cart forward for me to take.

“I checked him out. He’s good,” he said to the cashier.

I rolled the cart all the way to my car and left it in the grass median between the curb and sidewalk. Back at the apartment, Beth helped me put away the groceries and asked me how things had gone. I told her about seeing Yvette and the bribe I’d had to pay. She took some of the better snacks, the one that would help her aunt, towards the back bedroom. Ms. Gallot was starting to feel better but I could sense Beth still worrying about, a sort of mild panic that reminded me of when I played in a field sown with powerlines as a kid. The grass would catch the bare skin of my ankles and the flesh prickled with the shock. I felt the low thrum of it in Beth.

I wanted to tell her about Fiona. I wanted to tell her that I’d agreed to do something stupid. Of course, I could have just not shown up. I could have pretended to forget or chicken out. Courage, more and more, was starting to seem like a listed cause of

death rather than some valorous trait. But I was sure that if I did that, if I didn't show, that Fiona was going to try and go on her own. I could envision it, shaded like a noir film. How she came around the corner and was spotted by some bored, loitering guard who chased her until she found a dead-end alley and he shot her just once in the chest, or something like that. I had one of those bad, unshakable feelings about going and an even worse one about not going. And I wasn't going to burden Beth with that.

I made dinner for Beth and Ms. Gallot, but Beth spent the night down with her aunt. I worked on a new poster about rations, trying my hardest to emphasize the regulations. It was a misguided attempt at justice. The idea of publicly shaming that asshole who'd extorted me seemed like a great idea, but ultimately, what would it change? He'd look at the posters and laugh like he had when I'd brought up the rules that I knew. In the place of normal order, there was a system where the public had no power. And when Nick insisted we meet the next day, at a little diner in a nearby shopping center, and I said that to him, he looked up from the sandwich he was eating.

"Just one bad apple," he said.

"And the guy who was beaten?"

"Probably a thief. We get lots of reports of people stealing, trying to skirt ration rules. The longer this goes, the tighter we've got to cinch our belts to deal with those who can't play by the rules. It's the same as it is out there: a few rotten apples trying to spoil things the barrel. We have to be tougher and tougher to stop them from thinking they can take advantage of us. It's broken window policing, James, you know? People like that, they're the ones who have to be punished harshly for breaking that first window. It keeps

everything else safe. If we show weakness, we lose. We can't afford to lose. We have to win, we have to be strong."

"It seems like the wrong way to do it."

"They forced us into this. They've been forcing us into this for a long time, James. We're persecuted. It's become a crime to be like you and me, like all of us. The war started with the subtle degradation of our power by unfair measures, by calling us racists and pushing that politically correct agenda that made us the face of evil for everything we did."

"So it's a war?" He had never called it that before.

He swirled the mug of coffee, added another spoonful of sugar. "It's been a war on their end for a while. We just sat back and took it."

"So?"

"Two things," Nick said. He held up his spindly fingers in a peace sign and I couldn't help but smirk at the irony, though he didn't seem to notice it. "First, I heard about your neighbor. I hope she's OK. You tell me if you need anything else and we'll get it for you.

"And second, I need to thank you. You don't realize it, but you really saved us when you tried to get in touch with the emergency operators then and called Quarry. There was a group of saboteurs were trying to undo our network of communications in the city. They sent a bunch of unarmed men, you know, so that in case they did get caught it wouldn't be an act of aggression. But we still took it that way, yes we did. It's fine. We're going to interview them and send them back next week. It's OK."

“So I guess I won’t be getting driven around by Quarry and Norm again anytime soon?”

“That will depend on what these guys tell us. We know there’s two other groups in the city, but we haven’t been able to track them yet. Al’s working on it, but they’re good. But he’s caught everyone so far, since the very beginning. Tracked deserters and gangbangers. Anyone who starts trouble.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear I helped. I didn’t mean to, obviously, but...”

“You just get followed by coincidence. I know it feels that way, but it’s just dumb luck.”

“How’s things outside the city?”

“Slow. Your work is fine, it just isn’t clicking the way we want yet.” Why hadn’t what we’d been doing been working? Perhaps because a not insignificant portion of our base lived in the city now as the standing army, sure. And it was harder to use what tools Nick’s propaganda machine had been using before the fight, that fear of God and country, fire and brimstone, beware the coming of tyrants message. What the other side called “fearmongering.” It was harder to use them because people could see the government wasn’t exactly coming to get the guns or us in the city, as much as they would have liked to. They were just waiting for us to give up on our own, to collapse. But as Nick started rambling off how he did about true conservatives versus those in the media who’d abandoned him, about censorship and the sudden lack of conversation from our side that let us prove that we weren’t all conspiracy theorists and sovereign citizens, that we were

just concerned, I saw so clearly what was missing: it was Nick. He was trapped in this city. It was a cover over the torch, a dimmer.

“Nick,” I started, but he interrupted me.

“We need something people will recognize. Like...hell, I don’t know. Who’s your favorite conservative artist? We can give the people something they’re familiar with.” Ignoring for the moment the general proclivity for Americans to avoid art that isn’t beamed to them through a cablebox, computer, or movie screen, Nick seemed entirely unaware that I couldn’t have named a single modern conservative visual artist with a gun pressing squarely against my skull. And even if I could, they certainly weren’t a household name. As far as I could tell, most of the optics of the far right had been waged with image macros, memes on Facebook that people shared and spread with that fat white text that stripped all the focus away from the image itself, that spoon-fed the consumer. Nick kept talking, saying he wanted something bombastic, powerful, aggressive. He wanted something for his brand new little, as he’d called it, war. Iwo Jima. Raising a flag over the Reichstag.

“I think you want something Rockwellian,” I said.

“Yes, yes!” he said. He pounded his hand on the table.

Nick, obviously, had no idea about Rockwell.

“I’m almost done with my poster with you on it. I think it’ll work. It’ll remind them that we have a connection to the mainstream, establishment Republicans with good, American values.”

“I was in Congress. I was never the establishment.”

“You’re the closest thing they have. You’re the face of this whole thing.”

Nick seemed to deflate at that. His normally perfect posture collapsed into slumping shoulders, his fingers interlocked and elbows on the table, head staring into the coffee envired at the center of the triangle he’d just formed. “Sometimes this feels all wrong. Like I’ve fucked it all up.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Fiona like a shadow as she came out of that little house. All in black, passing the wilted flowers. She wore what would have been a normal runner's outfit, but it turned something else because I knew where we were going, what we were doing. Breaking curfew, sneaking around. She slung her camera bag into the backseat, then settled into the passenger side. I pulled off and drove uptown. I kept the lights on, hoping anyone who saw would just readily assume we were with the American Reclamation. That I wouldn't have to signal anything or slow down at all. I wanted to get there and get out fast as I could. We didn't speak until I sped up, racing under the overpass for I-277—and in those few seconds were below probably a dozen, maybe more, militiamen—while Fiona twisted to look out the back window to see if they seemed suspicious. But they didn't do anything.

“Should I just park in the EpiCentre garage?” I asked.

“Yes, stay on here and park on the 4th Street side. There's plenty of ways out. And if something happens, don't go straight back to the car. Use the skyways and get back down to the street,” she said.

“You've thought about this a lot.”

“Yes,” she said. “I had to.”

We pulled in to the EpiCentre and walked up the parking garage stairs where cockroaches skittered in the corners and there was that lingering smell of unpleasantly mixed things, gasoline and urine and cold concrete. Out the door a flight up, we came

into the shopping plaza with restaurants and clubs stacked on top of one another; it was one of those places in the city that was supposed to be always lit, a neon-sunny day. I had never seen it entirely dark before, but it was. Fiona took a camera out of her bag and started taking photographs. The first ones were just of the empty court. She showed me a couple and I couldn't make out much detail at all. Shops, restaurants, and clubs enclosed on just about every side and upwards for three stories.

“You might need to use your flash,” I said.

“You don't think that'll attract too much attention?”

I made an exaggerated case of looking around for people. “No, I think we'll be OK. Look, if we're right here, we're pretty walled in. I don't think the flash is going to be much of an issue.”

“OK.” She flipped something on the camera. “Smile!”

I saw stars as she took my picture.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“It's fine. You can delete it later. Did you come here a lot?”

“No, too many yuppies and bankers, and who needs so many clubs, right? God, when I was in college we just went to a normal bar and paid as little as we could for bad beer,” she said as she started to walk towards a stage that had been left up. Little piles of previously windbourne trash piled against its base. I pulled my little point-and-shoot digital camera from my pocket and took a picture of the Bank of America building looming visible through a gap that let us see the skyline above. Fiona, who'd been facing

away, spun back towards me with her hair like a dark and orbiting ring. “Jesus, James. I didn’t know you were doing it too. You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry. I came all the way out here. Might as well get a souvenir.” That, of course, was not why I’d taken the picture. I wandered for a bit, never too far from Fiona, who seemed so much surer of what we were doing than I was. There was something uncomfortably steady about her, that air of recklessness that I’d seen in her before, that giddiness, gone. She was calm. More than once, she chastised me for getting in her shots, and I started to self-consciously slink a little further away, still watching carefully like a lonely, jealous boy at an overcrowded party. Of course, it was easy to keep eyes on the woman when she was the only point of light in the area, even if only for that snap of the flash. She would take a picture, check the screen, and always take another. A methodical process. Professional. But the longer it went on and without a real sense of time and nothing much to guide me but that instinctual sense of danger, of something awfully, horribly wrong, it felt like something between my ribs slipped and fell towards my navel and as time went on the feeling deepened, a longer fall, a more insistent tug. My anxiety grew. Fiona must have noticed because after I’d been standing without using my own camera for a few minutes, she said, “Hey, why don’t you go up to the top and take some photos? Scout it out for me. I’ll meet you up there in a second.”

“Don’t you think we should be getting out of here soon? Just because we haven’t seen anyone yet doesn’t mean they aren’t going to patrol around here eventually.”

“There’s plenty of places to hide. It’s quiet. We’ll hear them coming.”

“We snuck in here no problem,” I pointed out.

“We’re not carrying rifles and gabbing with our buddies about how boring it is to be on patrol, either.” She came over and patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t chicken out on me now, James.”

“I would just rather not be shot tonight.”

“Look, we’ll come up with a signal.”

“Like a whistle? Really?”

“It’ll be worse. I can’t whistle. Look, if there’s danger, I’ll call you by your first name. There’s plenty of James in the city, right? They’d never know how to find you. You just run. And if it’s OK, I’ll use your last name. You do the same.”

“I don’t know your last name.”

“Campbell. Fiona Campbell.”

“OK. But know that I probably won’t hold up under interrogation.”

“We’ll be fine. Come on. I’ll meet you up there when I’m through down here.”

She’d pointed towards a balcony wrapping around a large orange mural on the side of one of the clubs, “Howl at the Moon.” I’d been in there a few times for a couple of birthday parties and one terrible date; it was a “dueling piano” bar, and the thought of that empty intrigued me. I told Fiona to be quick and went up the half-helix stairs. The bar was past a bridge over the plaza and I stopped to look over the railing. Without lights, it was a pit. I tried to imagine what it normally looked like below, with people. People enjoying themselves, walking with friends or dancing to the music pumped in from hung speakers dressed in that Charlotte way, dayglow sundresses or bright pastels, half the

time covered by Seersucker or a devilish blue. Instead, I thought of ghosts in quiet syncopation.

Inside the bar, I couldn't see much past the end of my nose. I'd brought my personal cellphone with me just for its flashlight app (the clock had become useless: without the ability to sync to a working cell tower, it kept resetting itself to a peculiarly exact time: 7:49 PM, Central Standard Time) and that was bright enough to illuminate some of the room, at least to the level of horror film shadows. I swung the light across, looking for something impossible to be lurking in the corners of the room. Suddenly I was living in the moment before a jump-scare. But there was nothing there, nothing too unusual at all. A bit dusty, perhaps. The bar just seemed closed. Chairs had been stacked in great towers, tables turned aside, out of the path for the cleaning crew. My light twinkled off the bottles and mirrors behind the bar nearest me. There was booze enough in quantity, quality, and variance to please even my father. And up on the stage were the two twin pianos. Fraternal, obviously: the one on the right was square and industrial with an inky sheen and the other wore its elegant, bowed frame with its lid seductively open. Up on the board behind them, someone—the last person out of the bar?—scrawled the lyrics to R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It" for a sick joke that almost no one would see. It got the chorus stuck in my head though, and I hummed it as I took pictures of everything, stuck between the impulse to document everything and wanting to take an artful opportunity I'd never have again, and between both of those my nervousness subsided until I remembered, came back to myself. I thought that Fiona was taking a long time.

I walked outside to the patio and looked down, but I couldn't see Fiona. No shadows, no camera flash. There was another set of stairs up to the bar on the other side; as I went to check when I saw people on the bridge. More than one, more than Fiona. My heart started to race as I tried to plan an escape. I could run down the stairs along the side of bar, but that would mean leaving Fiona with whomever, or I could retreat and figure out some plan. I didn't have the American Reclamation cell phone on me and I wish that I had brought it with the mindset that I could always call Quarry and ask for forgiveness instead of worrying about how he'd never have given me permission to come out here like this. I slipped back into the bar.

“Middleton!” Fiona called.

In the prep area behind one of the bars was a small knife, and I pocketed it before I headed back for the bridge.

Five: Two had an assault rifle trained somewhere near my ankles. One was back at the stairs down to the plaza. Then there was Fiona, who I could only recognize because of her hair, and another man standing next to her, his arms crossed over his chest. He seemed to be watching me intently. I turned to look behind me. Two more men were coming up the stairs. Seven. The ones with guns were dressed exactly like American Reclamation members. Fiona came forwards, the man next to her following a half-step behind. I could see him better, how he was built—hewn—like a golem from dark shale, a body made of coordinated stone. He wore a red track jacket, white striped. Looked nothing like a soldier.

“Fiona,” I whispered. My hand started for my pocket, but one of the men behind her saw it and raised his gun at me without a word.

“Just to confirm, you are James Middleton, correct?” Fiona said.

“What’s going on?”

“Answer the question, take your hands away from your pockets.”

I nodded. Held my hands out towards the railing as if overstatedly basking in sunlight. My stomach seemed to coat itself in sour rime. My heart felt out of rhythm, loud and obnoxiously hammering against my chest.

“Fiona, we should take him inside. Let him sit. He looks faint. Come on,” said the man. He had a prickled accent, sharp. New York. He gestured back towards the bar.

“Come.”

Back in the bar, one of the heavily armed men pulled down a table and chairs and sat three around. He gestured for me to sit. Fiona took the one across from me, and the other man sat on my right.

“I am Sergeant Daniel Nkeoma. You can just call me Daniel.”

“James,” I said.

“Hello.”

Fiona took out a piece of paper, crisply folded into thirds. “I’ll let you read this for yourself.”

She passed it over into my hands and I looked at it for a long time before I decided to slowly unfold it, my hands shaking so the paper flapped. I stopped before I

started though, and I looked at her. “So, pictures were just an elaborate ruse to get me here so I could be, what? Arrested? Shot?”

Daniel shook his head emphatically. “No, not at all.”

“You aren’t in any danger that you haven’t already put yourself in, James,” Fiona said. “Open the paper. See what it says. And then we’ll talk.”

I knew what it was already, though. Opening it wasn’t necessary. Still, I did, and only then did we all realize it was too dark to read in the bar. Daniel asked me to wait for another minute, leaving the table and rummaging across the room for a bit, before he returned with two of the candles that usually sat on the tabletops. He lit them both and it filled our table with light. I opened the paper.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

for the

Western District of North Carolina

United States of America

v.

James Daniel Middleton

Defendant

Case No. 4-22-CR-

ARREST WARRANT

To: Any authorized law enforcement officer

YOU ARE COMMANDED to arrest and bring before a United States magistrate judge without unnecessary delay (name of person to be arrested) James Daniel Middleton, who is accused of an offense or violation based on the following document filed with the court:

- Indictment
- Superseding Indictment
- Information
- Superseding Information
- Complaint
- Probation Violation Petition
- Supervised Release Violation Petition
- Violation Notice
- Order of the Court

This offense is briefly described as follows:

James Daniel Middleton has knowingly collaborated with members of the American Reclamation, an organization of domestic terror under 18 U.S. Code §2331.5. He has assisted in the creation and transmission of propaganda with the express purpose of destabilizing or otherwise participating in acts of war against the government of the United States. He has operated in an organized manner with Alvin Hayward, Nicholas Stephen Brewer, and other members of the American Reclamation leadership. Specifics of these actions and their methods of discovery and investigations are classified but pursuant to FISA Warrant granted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation on . Therefore, an arrest warrant is issued for James Daniel Middleton for violation of 18 U.S. Code §2381 &c. on the charge of treason.

Date: 04/08/2016

Issuing officer's signature

City and state: Charlotte, North Carolina

Printed name and title

Figure 1

Daniel put his hands out as if trying to physically tamp down my fear. “I insisted that we pull you away from your house, just in case. You are in less danger here than there. But, yes. This has all been very elaborate. But that was my design. Fiona said we should just talk to you, that we should just take you to a cell, or some basement. But I wanted you to see things. To be clear when we present our offer, Are they clear?”

“Offer?” I asked.

“I want your help. You make beautiful posters, you know. I have seen them.”

Daniel turned to one of the other men. “Do you know if that water works? I think he needs water.” He turned back to me and patted me on the shoulder. “I think you are on the wrong side, but I am a bit of a fan.”

“How do you know I make posters?”

Daniel passed me a bottle of water. “We’re very good at finding people, James. We find what they do and how they do it.”

Fiona interjected: “James, this city isn’t as safe as you think it is. We’re letting the American Reclamation keep its border because we don’t want to gunfights in the street, and I think you understand that that’s what this could easily come to. We both saw what they did to that man at the grocery store. Despite what you might be hearing from Congressman Brewer, people are getting hurt.”

I was amazed, afraid of this change in Fiona. Any sense of demureness, of her being anything but steel-spined fell away. I kept stuttering over my words, gobsmacked at it all but most of all this strange, surreal awareness that I was in the middle of “good cop, bad cop,” but both of these people meant it. These felt like their most honest selves. “And, what? You want me to convince him to give up?”

“Do you think you could? That would be magnificent,” Daniel laughed. “No. No.”

“Daniel thinks it’s funny, but he’s not being honest with you: you’re a red cunt hair from being labeled a terrorist, a traitor, and an enemy combatant. See that treason charge? That’s the first step. That means no rights, no protections. Nothing to help you

out at all.” Fiona leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table. It rocked on uneven feet, clattering like tin drum. “Remember that time you were out on I-85 and looking at all those guns? Next time, they’ll be allowed to shoot you. And they will, and they’ll probably like it, because they’re getting sick of being out there. This has to end soon, James.”

“James, Fiona is right. It must end, and we think we can do it with less bloodshed if you help us.”

“So you want me to, what?”

“We want you to be a spy,” Daniel said. “A very clever spy.”

“And if I don’t?”

Fiona’s shoulders rolled with her sigh. “Were you not listening? You don’t want to say that. I just told you that people will be able to shoot you. They might be encouraged to shoot you.”

“I’m an American citizen.”

“You wouldn’t even be the first one shot this week,” she said. “You’re getting played and you don’t even know it. You’re either dead for them or alive for us. Think for a minute here, Middleton. You’re not Snowden or some brave ex-pat from some faraway land. You’re here. Look how easily we got to you now. Do you think that wouldn’t change? You have drones that basically circle your apartment. Even if you told Brewer, all that would do is force us to push our bosses to make everything work faster and take the city with more force. That means more people will die, and you might be one of them,

and even if you aren't I hear Cuba is nice all year 'round, but not from within a cell at Guantanamo."

I drank.

The bar was quiet except for the guard checking the windows. Daniel and Fiona were both looking at me.

"I don't want to help you."

"Fine. Tian, give me zipties."

"Wait," Daniel said. "Fiona, wait."

"This wasn't supposed to take so long, Daniel. Come on, we need to get back. Especially since we have to take his car now."

"Give me one minute with James alone. Please."

"What?"

"A minute."

Fiona looked back and forth between us. "Fuck, fine. Whatever. Hurry the fuck up." She stood and walked out the side door, to the balcony where we'd been supposed to meet.

Daniel watched me for a minute. Then he smiled. He had a wide smile, showing his tall gums and straight white teeth. "This is a funny thing, us here. I never thought this would be the case when I worked at Quantico or even when they put me in Afghanistan, because who thinks they'll be working for military intelligence in an active combat zone in North Carolina? James, I do not want to arrest you. I believe you are doing what you think is best. But right now, you must do what we ask. You really do not have a choice."

Betrayal, when it's imminent and ominous has a queer feeling that seems to form at the roof of the mouth, like an itch that I probed at with my tongue, and from there it seemed to grow thin and veined roots that spread across and down the throat into the palpitations that shook my ribs, my body, and it felt like there was just a moment where I could deracinate it all if I could just eek out something, not just anything but one specific sentence, through pursed lips. Here, it just seemed to be I had to say yes. But I wasn't sure how real Daniel's offer was, if I could just speak the words and be free. I just watched him. He was stonelike. Still, more than, even. He seemed to act against entropy.

“So, what? I say I'll do it and then don't?”

“You will have more time to make a choice. I think that this is something that should not be taken lightly. Fiona, she wants to squeeze you into going along. But I don't think that will work for you, will it? Here's you. You've helped a girl and her aunt. You've helped your old friend. That, to me, is genuineness. That's loyalty. And what did Fiona do? Just lie to you. Then I won't lie to you. I will tell you that we know who you are. You are on our radar. But we think you can be useful. I think you can make a good decision. If not for yourself,” Daniel looked up as Fiona came back in, then back at me. “For Beth.”

“What's it going to be?” Fiona asked.

“I'm”—I looked back and forth between Daniel and Fiona—“Doesn't seem like there's a choice at all. What do you need me to do?”

“Well, first, do you know anything useful?”

“I've never been accused of it.”

“Come on, James. Something? What are you working on?”

I ran through what I couldn't tell them, the ones that felt like secrets I could safely keep and would still protect myself and the American Reclamation. That would, as Daniel said, give me more time to go home and figure something, anything else out:

- No to recruitment posters. (did that mean they were worried about desertions? Or just wanted more bodies?)
- No to rations. (would they think that meant they could just starve us out?)
- No to the portrait of Nick (they already knew he was the face).
- No posters on weapons.
- No maps.
- Nothing on troop placements or where meetings were held.

Eventually I came to telling them that I was working on posters to dramatize the demands Nick and the American Reclamation had made, the ones that had been in place since the outset. Resignation of the president, protection of states' rights, reduced gun control, so on and so on.

“These posters will be hanging in the city?” Daniel asked.

“Yes. They're morale boosters. Reminders that the government is being unreasonable by not discussing or negotiating these demands and is instead blockading the city.”

“You will include something in the posters. Something that will not seem out of place, and it needs to be exactly where I say, James. Got it?” Fiona waited until I nodded.

My first message was more of a warning that more messages would be coming. Along the right side, I placed D-T-G on what looked like a street sign, followed by a

future date. On another poster, in the same general location, I featured a calendar with the same date circled. Messages plain as day, if you just knew where to look.

Daniel and his gunslingers followed Fiona and me down to the car. Just in case I had been followed or seen, we still had to go back to the little house with the dead flowers out front. She drove, another man laid across the floor of the backseat. It was like the end of the night of a second horrible date at Howl at the Moon, and I chuckled in the car. Fiona watched me, then shook her head. It was something so much worse. Neither of us said a word to one another, another quiet ride, until I pulled up to her house and she said, “Good night, James,” as if nothing had happened, as if nothing at all had taken place. But of course it had, and Daniel was right: I didn’t trust her. But I could do something about it. I thought perhaps that Nick could make me disappear, that I could end up at the college or any one of a hundred places in the city and never be found if I was just careful to slip away. They wouldn’t be able to hurt Beth, and she’d probably be in less danger if I separated myself from her. But that would be hard. Beth, she came up the stairs as I unlocked the door to my apartment. She must have heard the car.

“You OK?”

“Yeah, for now. You coming over?”

“If you don’t mind,” she said. She kissed me, and it felt like a cool breeze, gentle rain amid my world imploding.

INTERLUDE

Ration Rules. A shopping list. The first piece of mine they put up, replacing those ugly fliers printed in 72-point Impact and on red paper that had gone up everywhere overnight in a demonstration of force. A carpet-bombing. This poster humanizes it, normalizes it. Like a PSA, with cartoonish drawings of the limited foods. A gallon of milk, three to five cans of vegetables, two pounds of chicken, beef, pork, and fish, one frozen meal, one carton of eggs, two loafs of bread.*

OTHER ITEMS SHALL BE RATIONED AS NECESSARY FOR THE COMFORT AND SAFETY OF THE PUBLIC. LARGE HOUSEHOLDS MUST CONTACT THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD CAPTAIN. 9-1-1 WILL FUNCTION AS NORMAL IN CASE OF EMERGENCY.

I used a stock photo, the default for a frame I'd never put a picture in, altered so the happy family now carried plastic bags. A crouching, smiling boy with a bowl cut and a wide smile obviously added in afterwards. For that emotional connection. Grocery shopping shouldn't be fearful.

Strangled Eagle. On bended knee, wings clutching desperately at his throat and with bulging eyes looking askew, unfocused on the curlicue telephone cord the president is using as a garrote to crush the eagle's feathers and windpipe. All caricature. Ray-Bans and that grin. Pressed suit and calm face. Unflustered. At their feet is a start-spangled ribbon that flows into a white prism and refracts into a sticky black light, a clinging shadow.

The Listening Man. Blue screens, like an old film shot of televisions in the window of an electronics store. Stacked monitors are our new stained glass: transient,

flashy, captivating. Six on the bottom row. The silhouette of the listening man is almost solid black, obstructs the only monitor with a picture on it. No text. Unnecessary. He has heard everything.

YOU ARE PREY across the head. Yellow block text to stand out against the arcus clouds: solid, bulbous and black, harbinger of storms bearing white specks of lightning underbelly ready to cast down against the unseen earth. The spherical face of the drone takes the bottom third of the print, formed from negative space in sterilized whiteness, its whale-crown head of blind atheism and unthinking, undiscerning sensors. The invisible abyss of technology that has begun to stare back. Along the bottom:

REPORT SIGHTINGS OF PREDATOR DRONES TO THE AMERICAN RECLAMATION.

TAKE BACK YOUR CITY. TAKE BACK YOUR COUNTRY. TAKE BACK YOUR FREEDOMS.

BIOGRAPHY

Justin Lafreniere earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Queens University of Charlotte in 2011. He served as the fiction editor for *So to Speak*: a feminist journal of literature and art and as the prose editor for Stillhouse Press. In 2015, he attended the Tin House Writers' Workshop for short fiction, where he studied with Claire Vaye Watkins. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *The Postgame*, *Charlotte Viewpoint*, *The Western Online*, and other publications. In 2016, he earned his Master of Fine Arts from George Mason University.