

The background of the cover is a painterly illustration. At the top, the word 'BURN' is written in large, white, hand-painted letters. Below it, a landscape is depicted with a house in the center, a large tree on the right, and a boat on the water to the right. The colors are muted and earthy, with a lot of texture from the brushstrokes. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

BURN

A NOVEL

PETER HELLER

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE LAST RANGER

ALSO BY PETER HELLER

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PETER HELLER

ALFRED A. KNOPF

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THIS IS A BORZOI

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Cover image: *Boat Building in Maine* (detail) by Paul Dougherty.

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To my grandmother Rose Backer Heller, and to my grandfather Harry Ashton Watkins. With all my love.

PRO LO GUE

He let the fire burn down to embers, let the dark envelop him, and stood.

Jess stepped to the edge of the trees and looked down to the water. It was a big lake and he could see only the bay and the curve of the wooded shore and he could see that the water held there was nearly glass. The black mirror floated countless stars, and the stars barely rocked. He lifted his eyes to where they held fast in the depthless sky and he saw among them a satellite sailing swiftly east to west, and he wondered what it might be witnessing in its silent transit.

If he himself could be a night bird, like some great horned owl on soundless wings, would he fly north over the next town, over the road beyond it? Randall, that was the name on the map, wasn't it? Would he want to see? Probably not.

In the days since they had found the bridge over the river blown and no way south he had dreamed hard every night. Dreams on dreams, with segues like swinging bridges. He had dreamed of their house, his house now, but it stood in the sage of some high western desert unprotected by a single tree, and the rail fences were broken, the horses vanished. In the dream they had more than one horse, but he couldn't remember how many or if he had asked a neighbor to care for them while he was gone. Because he *was* gone. That was the gut weight of the dream, his own absence from anything like home. He dreamed the return again and again, a homecoming only as much as an old negative represented the photographed image, a homecoming that was as much a leaving, and she was never in it. He called for her inside a house he no longer recognized, and again and again in successive nights he walked around the house to the back, to the clothesline stanchions that gestured like empty crosses, and he found a well and he called for her there and dared to look down it and received only cold echo. He woke from that dream with the pillow of his rolled jacket wet. He lay in the wash of his own story and let the sound of a faint broken music trail off, and he let himself cry, and almost as soon as he gave himself permission to sleep he was pulled back into the dark. There was no swimming above it.

He dreamed then that he was in a pasture digging, first with a spade, which he laid down so he could scoop back the finely graveled mud with bare hands, the ditch some kind of drain, and when he stood he saw a former lover walking past the white clapboard house, her glance back seductive the way any vista is seductive just passing out of view. But he didn't know her. He should but he didn't. She had large dark eyes, as Jan had, and his longing was for something familiar, some beauty that rolled in his raw fingers as the prayer stone she had given him rolled now, while he stood with the trees at his back.

She called it a prayer stone. It was the size of a radish and taken from their favorite creek and given to him as a reminder to pay attention: *Love is attention*, she'd said. *That is all you know on earth.*

He had it in his pocket now, and as he stood at the edge of the woods and watched the drifting stars jostle barely on the water like faint semaphores, and smelled the cold sediment of the lake and the cold char of the town, he squeezed the stone in his right palm and wished he could signal her as the sparked reflections on the water seemed to blink to the thrown galaxies arching above: *I am here. Forever rhyming, forever loyal.*

Or maybe it was just an unheard music that time and space could never quiet. A music that turned and turned like a horse in the wheeling dark. And with that thought, and the warming stone chafing his palm, he thrummed with a grief and love so immense he could not contain it. To stand here. To breathe. To witness. He thought wildly in that moment, *They better be enough.*

Chapter One

They had come to the lake and the village that afternoon. They were on foot and it was the first real town they'd seen. Like the general store at Four Corners and the farm two miles north, it was burned to the ground. The houses, mostly wood, had left masonry hearths for monuments, and stone chimneys, and concrete slabs, and blackened stem walls. So close to the water, and the water table so high, few of the houses had basements; those were pits filling with water like abandoned quarries.

Of an entire town, only four dead, blackened bodies curled in the ruins. Where was everyone else?

They had moved up and down what once were streets, and they shouted, as if they might call them in like elk to a bugle. Nothing. Wind. The veering of the swallows who circled very high and silent and flashed violet-green when the sun broke through. Not much sun left: in scudding cloud, it was less than an hour off the ridge.

They came to the western edge of what once was a main street and stood against the dark woods. From there they could survey the mostly leveled ruin spilling downslope toward the lake. It was odd: Every vehicle they'd come across was a burned husk, but the docks of the marina still stood, and the boats tied there. A scattering of day sailer sloops rocked at their moorings. Rocked in an evening wind that brought the smells of lakewater and char. Jess had lifted the strapped binoculars to his eyes. Any living soul would be there in one of the boats, wouldn't they? Crouched in some cockpit, huddled below in a V-berth as cramped as a coffin. They would be there with two days' worth of canned food and a lake-full of water to drink, wondering if they were lucky or not to survive.

“What the hell,” Storey had said.

Jess shook in his fleece jacket as if he were cold. He lowered the binocs. “It’s like some war.”

“Jesus, Jess, it is a war.” Storey was ashen. He held his rifle unslung in his left hand and his cell phone in his right. “I can’t reach Lena. No reception. None.”

Jess knew. He had thought he might find some news on his phone, but there was nothing. They had had nothing for six days.

“I’ve gotta get home,” Storey said again, mostly to himself. It had become a mantra.

“Yeah, sure.” But neither knew how. South wasn’t working. Unless they walked and waded. It might come to that.

“We’ll hike up to Randall tomorrow. Right?” Jess said. “See if we can rent a car or something. Then maybe try heading straight west to Quebec. Then down.” They were in the middle of northern Maine. There were a few small towns and nothing else but lakes, woods, ridges, logging roads. It was maybe 75 miles west to Quebec as the crow flies, and much longer by gravel road. Straight to New Hampshire was about 150 miles southwest, but there was no way to go straight. The coast was just as far.

Storey stared hard at his oldest friend. “Rent a car,” he repeated.

“Maybe it’s local.” As soon as Jess said it he knew it was lame. Local. All summer the entire state had been convulsed with secession mania. It had pitted the populous coast against the sparse inland, the islands against the ports, islands against each other, Down East against Portland. County against county and town against town. And old Mainers against those From Away. What it really did, Jess thought, was stress any old fault lines and stir up simmering resentments. There had been calls for a vote in the state Legislature, a few riots, a shooting in Bath. But no one expected it to come to full-bore civil strife. They had discussed the risk while planning the trip and decided that what was happening in Maine was no worse than the stirrings of revolt in Idaho and the failed secession vote in Texas the year before. These were fringe minorities, vocal and passionate, but not a real threat. Also, they would be deep in the wilds of north-central Maine: the only time they’d see a soul was if they drove into some outpost convenience store for groceries and gas. And he’d needed this—Jess had. They’d been meeting for this hunt in the woods of different states for a dozen years now, and after the toughest year, Jess needed the return with his oldest friend to something known and worn and loved. To smells he knew, and ridges, and brooks; to the rhythms of camp and the hunt in which he could lose himself; to tradition.

So, this afternoon, as they stood above the burned town and surveyed the wreckage, they had not been able to countenance what they saw. Storey had rubbed his eyes with the back

of the hand that held the phone. His cheek was wet. He shoved the phone into his pants pocket, shouldered the rifle, and sighted down to the lake.

“We need food,” he had said finally. It was true: at midday they had eaten the last of the freeze-dried dinners they’d packed for a week of hunting. “There’s gotta be some provisions on those boats.”

“Gotta be.” Jess lifted the binocs again and scanned the far shore of the bay. Where there must have been houses before, there were clearings, flagpoles, the pillars of other chimneys like gaudy headstones. “Camp here at the edge of the woods and go down tomorrow?” he had said.

“Okay. We should stay in cover. From now on.” Storey lowered the rifle. Lately, he liked to scan with the scope. One less step, in case. He looked at the lowering clouds. Probably coming rain. Among the swallows, below them, three nighthawks wheeled and fed. They were larger, just as agile, and they darted and swooped with a blinking of wing bars and a quiet muttering of staggered peeps. Someone was acting as if the world were normal, Storey thought.

They turned and walked into the trees.



Jess had gathered wood, the fallen limbs of spruce and white birch. He did not bother to muffle the sound as he broke the longer branches. They could see where the attack had swept out of the town—ash and mud and what must have been blood like oil stains on the county road that continued on north around the shore. How many, who knew. They were gone. A few warm embers in the ruin, and so probably just hours old.

He and Storey had a better map now, a water-stained gazetteer they had found fluttering outside the burned shell of a Bronco as they approached. No corpse, but the strewn contents of a rucksack littering down the two-lane highway—broken flashlight, a Gore-Tex rain jacket, packet of peppered jerky—as if the driver had been apprehended in flight. The Zippo Jess was using now had been lying in the road. Maybe they took them, survivors or bodies, took them all. The thought occurred to Jess as he crushed two handfuls of desiccated spruce twigs and lit them with the lighter. Why not the boats? It was as if they had had no time. Collect as many inhabitants as possible and move on. No time to row or swim out. But why not the boats along the dock? Bumping against their fenders, untouched? Maybe they had night vision, a thermal scope; maybe they could see no one was out there hiding. If they did have infrared, then camping back in the trees would offer little cover. Probably not. If they’d had night vision, he and Storey would be dead by now. Dead at thirty-seven.

The map showed the next town, Randall, nearly five miles up the lake. Ten-minute drive. Twenty. Given the state of the cooling wreckage and the seeming direction of travel, the attackers were there by now, there and gone. No column of smoke to the north, but that

meant nothing. Jess shivered. If tomorrow the two of them decided to go that way, he had an idea of what they'd find.

Jess had set two palms on the duff either side of the scraped dirt and blew gently on the lit nest of twigs and watched the small yellow flame climb into the crumpled lace of dried spruce and find the small sticks above. He watched the flames adhere and propagate and run along the lengths of tinder and flutter orange to blue. He reached behind him and broke larger branches and laid them over and let the fire grow big enough to warm them. Storey could maybe read his mind: Jess heard his steps behind, and Storey said, "I'll go down to the boats on the dock. No risk now." "Okay."

"I've been cold in the summer bag, and someone will have sleeping bags or blankets. And maybe better dinner than mac and cheese."

Jess said no word but nodded once; he did not turn and he heard Storey move off.

He had poured a two-quart water bottle into a pot and set it to straddle two rocks, and he took a stout stick and scraped embers and flaming wood between them. He built up the rest of the fire, and when he heard Storey's steps behind him again he stood stiffly.

"Hey." Storey's voice ragged. "Hey—" The word cracked. Rustle as he set down two rolled nylon department-store sleeping bags. Jess turned. Storey's face was strange, as in the face of a stranger. "I found someone. In the water."

"Alive?"

Head shake.

"What?"

"I pulled her out of the shallows. She had a rock in her shirt. Tucked into the belly. Water maybe four feet deep." "So?"

"She could've shaken it loose anytime. She drowned herself."

Jess blinked at his friend. "Maybe— maybe someone threw her in." "No." That simple. When Storey knew something he knew it.



Jess had made the mac and cheese. There were two nested stainless-steel pots, and in the smaller he heated water, and he gave Storey a cup of Lipton with brown sugar. Some things had not changed much since their first outing, when they were kids. What had changed was the tempo of the music. They had both slowed, Jess more than Storey. It was less a physical ebbing—the expected scars and injuries and stiffness—less about bones and more about the heart. Jess thought that life’s mounting losses had slowed him. The loss of a wife the year before. The dog, Bell, he’d inherited from Jan. Jan Jan Jan. All gone into the dark.

They sat on a log Jess had dragged over and ate the noodles and two cans of Pringles and some chocolate bars Storey had found on the boats. A mouse had already sampled the chocolate, and they broke off the gnawed ends. There would be more food; they’d go down and look tomorrow.

They had strung up a tarp, as they had since their first hunting trip. They did not bother to build up the sides with brush for a windbreak because the breeze off the lake was light and with the extra bags as blankets they would be plenty warm. They let the fire burn down. Jess was the last one up and he did not bother to douse it.



They were woken by rain. Rain drumming the tarp, and rolling thunder, and flashes of distant lightning making brief calligraphy of the interlaced spruce boughs. The tarp was taut and big enough and they were dry.

Jess felt Storey bump against him as he shifted in his bag, and he murmured, “That is lightning, right?”

“Damn if I know,” Storey said. “That next town is five miles off and north. The flashes seem to be over the lake. Further off.”

“Yeah.” Jess rolled onto his back and moved the jacket he used as a pillow up onto the pack behind his head and bolstered himself. “You wanna try that village up the shore? Randall?”

Storey hadn’t heard him. He had found his cell phone in the dark, and Jess saw it glow and then extinguish. “Nothing, right?” Jess said.

“No.” The rain pattered and sifted on the tarp. He couldn’t see his friend’s face, and he didn’t want to.

“Maybe, when we get up there, there’ll be something. Maybe there’s a tower.”

Storey didn’t answer. Well. He had two daughters and a wife back in Vermont. He, Jess, had no one. It was a little over a year since Jan had left, and their dog, Bell, had died two months later. Collapsed on her walk. Only seven and with no known health conditions—

Jess figured she'd died from a broken heart. Did dogs do that? Some nights he had willed himself to go the same way; no luck.

This trip was Jess's favorite annual ritual. Together, they often hunted the mountains of Vermont and Colorado, but this year, against great odds, they both drew nonresident moose tags in Maine, and so decided to hunt the earliest season in the big empty wilderness of north-central Maine, south of Mount Katahdin and east of Moosehead Lake. The famed and populous coast was more than a hundred miles away. You could drive a gravel road for hours and never see another soul but maybe the glimpsed face and wave of a truck driver, a log truck passing too fast and throwing stones against your windshield. The country was rolling wooded hills mostly, with spines of steeper ridges, and the valleys whispered with brooks and rivers that spilled into lakes and bogs. A country to get lost in.

They had hunted at the first camp for five days. They'd crossed sign—tracks, beds, scat—but not as much as in years past, and they'd come upon moose—cows with calves—but not as many. Neither even saw a bull. So they'd decided to shift the hunt to a boggy watershed to the south. They drove. When they found the bridge over the little river severed, they had parked in the shade and stood on the broken abutment. They blinked in the brightness and the heat—a sultry, humid, late-September afternoon. Storey had hopped out on a twisted girder and crouched. He placed one hand on the sunwarmed steel and ran his fingers over it. He looked up at Jess.

“Blown,” he said.

“What?”

“The bridge was blown. Like blown up.” Storey would know: he had been a dedicated rock climber in college, and in the summers he had worked on a road crew, blasting loose rock off of highway cliffs.

“Like dynamite?”

“Or C-4. Boom. Remember *The Bridge on the River Kwai*?”

“Who would do that?”

Storey shrugged. “Maybe it was condemned and they didn't wanna risk anyone using it.”

“That's crazy.”

They had turned the SUV around. They had planned to gas up in Branch and they were low on fuel. But they had no choice, and they backtracked to the next Forest Service road to the west and turned south again. It was a forty-mile detour. The woods were starting to turn, and the low sun came through them and lit them to amber. It was like driving through honey. Again they had come to a river—this one larger—and again the bridge was out. Not out, but deliberately destroyed. There was no cell service. They had topography of only

the districts they would hunt and they had the gazetteer and a gas-station road map. They opened the map on the hood of the 4Runner. The closest town was back to the north, on the west side of the big lake. Fifty-seven miles, give or take. What might be a hamlet with a gas pump was about forty miles away on the same road. They had gotten about halfway when the engine revved and died. Out of gas. So they locked the Toyota and shouldered their hunting packs and took up their rifles and walked. They only had an hour and a half of daylight on that first day of hiking. On the afternoon of the second, they wondered aloud why they hadn't seen another logging truck, or the vehicles of other hunters. Jess began to carry a stone in his gut he recognized as dread. On the morning of the third, they passed a green sign that said "Four Corners, Population 9." His first thought was: *How often do they change that sign? Doesn't anyone go away to college or retire to Arizona?* But then they smelled a black stench like the inside of a woodstove and they came around the forested bend to the burned remains of seven buildings. Four Corners, Population 0.



They had walked on the verge of the roads then, where they could duck into the woods if they needed to. They walked with a round chambered in their rifles, which they usually never did. They kept their cell phones on airplane mode to conserve battery, but when they stopped to take a drink in the shade of some brook, one or the other turned his phone's receiver on and scanned for a cell signal. Nothing. Out here they didn't expect any, but it cost nothing to try. They both had water-filter straws and the hills were threaded everywhere with streams, so thirst was never an issue. Once, at midday, they trotted down to the bank of a black-water pond and stripped and swam. The water was ice cold, but neither whooped. They clambered out through horsetail and dried in the breeze and let the sun smooth the goose bumps on their arms, and on any other day they would have hooted and grinned.

On the afternoon of the third day of walking, they came to a meadow maybe two miles wide. The road went right through the middle. Jess set his pack down and walked away to scout the edge along the treeline.

When he came back he said, "Ton of blowdown. And blackberry bramble. Tough walking. Very."

"Okay. I guess we'll take the road."

Neither felt good about being in the open for half an hour. They both unslung their rifles and they opened the breeches and checked again for the rounds there. Storey had a Model 70 Winchester .30-06, bolt action; Jess his father's .308 lever-action Savage 99. Both were scoped and both men were very good shots. Jess had always made clean kills; he could not remember when he had wounded an animal. Neither spoke, and they crossed the meadow without incident.

That night, they had pushed through the dense alders at the edge of a swamp and made a small fire and cooked one of the two remaining backpack meals. “*Gallo Pinto*, Costa Rican Rice and Beans,” it said on the pouch. Jess said the name seemed pompous. “What makes it Costa Rican?” he said.

Storey shrugged.

“And as if that was somehow better? Or more hip? Where does this stuff come from, anyway?” He tilted the packet in the slant light. “Figures.”

“Where?” Storey turned. Jess thought he looked for a second a little less like a zombie. He had noticed that every time Storey had checked his phone and found no news or way to connect with his family his eyes seemed a little duller.

“Golden, Colorado.”

“No kidding?” Storey’s eyes actually sparked. “That’s your backyard, isn’t it? Coors and *gallo pinto*.” Storey knew it was his backyard; he had visited Jess in Denver at least a dozen times. The last time they’d hunted elk over in Paonia, they’d celebrated the end of the week at the Silver Dollar Hotel, in Golden.

“Yep.”

“So you’d probably call rice and beans *gallo pinto*, too, if you could get away with it.”

“I do it all the time.”

Storey’s smile fluttered and stuck. Jess felt such relief to see it. And they ate the second-to-last supper with gusto. While they were eating, Jess said:

“Do you think this is some militia thing?”

“You mean about the stupid secession?”

“Some people clearly don’t think it’s so stupid.”

“What would they be doing way up here? Don’t they have better bridges to take out?”

Storey added a couple of sticks to the fire. Jess refilled the pot with water and nestled it into the coals for tea. “It’s weird. Do they want to keep moose from moving south—the moose and the loggers? And what’s the point of burning down some crossroads general store? Except to keep you and me from getting gas?”

No point. But neither slept well, and the next day they walked into the town by the lake. What was once a town.

Chapter Two

So that's how they got to the lake and the ruined town. The town, according to the map, was named Green Hill. They had never been through it before, or to the shores of this lake. There was no green sign on the road this time; it had been blasted or burned. As if whoever had come through the day before had wanted to wipe it off the face of the earth. Was that just yesterday?

That morning, camping in the woods above the wreckage, they lay in the predawn dark and listened to the rain patter and sweep across the tarp with the rhythm of the winds, and neither was willing to move from the warmth of their sleeping bags. Jess thought that if he could just focus on the nested heat and sound of the rain and the smells of the wet woods he might lie there in relative peace for the rest of his days.

He said, "What do you think they want?"

"We don't even know who *they* are."

"Yeah."

"Secessionists, I guess. I don't know." Storey reached back with both hands and bunched the pillow of his jacket tighter under the back of his head. He said, "If we knew, maybe we'd have a better idea what the hell's going on."

"I was thinking about that woman down there."

"The one I found?"

"Yes. You think she held on to that rock?"

"No. That's why she tucked it in her shirt. She was smart. Also..."

"What?" Jess said.

Storey coughed. "I wasn't going to..."

"...tell me?"

"Yeah."

"Kinda too late for that."

"I know."

Another flash, silent, and for a moment they saw the rain as a luminous scrim, and the dark lacing of the boughs, and then the far-off thunder boomed and rolled off the edge of the night like distant artillery. Maybe it was.

“She was pregnant,” Storey said.

“Like full-term.” “Oh.”

And they were silent, and Jess felt grateful for the drum and rush of the rain, which muted even his wildest imaginings. Because he didn’t have it in him. To keep guessing at why any of this was happening.



By first light, the rain had calmed to a gentle sift on the cloth roof, and it was a mere mist when they zipped into Gore-Tex rain gear and stepped out into the gray dawn. Cold, nearly frost. They walked to the edge of the woods and pissed and could not see the lake for the fog that lay over it and shredded in the tops of the trees on the far shore.

“I’ll go down,” Jess said. “Maybe I can find us something for breakfast.”

“You will. After the...I didn’t have it in me to scavenge.”

Jess picked up the .308 and slung the rifle and walked. He stopped, turned. “Did you leave her there? In the water? I don’t want to...” He trailed off.

Storey shook his head. “I carried her up to what must have been the marina shack and buried her in cinders.”

“Okay.”

Jess walked. Down the corridor of a paved street blown with drifting ash. The street dropped straight into the fog, and he descended into cloud. As he walked, the skeletal masonwork on either side faded to shapes spectral and half formed in the moving shroud and he made himself keep on. Where were the vehicles? Burned husks, every one. He felt it before he saw it: the lakewater warmer than the night air. And smelled an almost sea-like rank, maybe old algae on the rocks of the shore, or discarded fish, and he thought how fathers and daughters or sons might have been fishing here off the double docks just yesterday afternoon. Not possible. Years had passed since then.

He skirted the wet ash-and-cinder heap of what must have been the marina office and found the flagstone pavers that brought him to the docks and the boats tied there. The main stems of the docks extended eastward into the lake; they branched to either side with the shorter, planked decks of the berths. There were two docks, and he chose the one to the south, on his right hand. J-boats, day sailers, cats, and outboard skiffs. These were small sloops with cockpits and windowed cabins, and Jess knew they would have chests and latching cupboards with some provisions.

The first he came to had beautiful salmon-colored sails reefed and tied along the boom. No cover had been snapped over them, which meant probably that she was regularly used. What day of the week was it? He didn't know. Maybe yesterday was Saturday and the owners hadn't buttoned the cover on the sails because they knew they'd be back to sail today. What we take for granted—that another day would come. Everyone had to know in their bones that every life hung by a thread. That the world did. But if we couldn't pretend to count on a morning of sailing, or fishing, or a visit with someone we loved the next day, we'd go nuts, right? Right. So pretend away.

The boat was called *Isabella*. That simple. No pretense to sophistication like the catamaran beside it called *Aphrodite*. No crude pun like the fishing cruiser in the next berth with downriggers and twin Mercs called *Fish n Chicks*. Jess hopped over the cable rail of the sloop and into the cockpit with its stainlesssteel wheel.

He faced a locked hatch that battened the entry and what he knew were steps down to the cabin. The hatch was stout teak, beaded with rain, secured at the top with a padlock. He climbed back onto the dock and up to the ruin of the marina shack and past it. He did not want to dig around in the wreckage and find the woman. He went on between what once were houses and, in what had to be a backyard with a single standing apple tree, he found the small foundation of what yesterday was probably a toolshed. Beside a toppled rolling toolbox he found a blackened fireman's ax. It was solid steel and had heft and balance but was not heavy; the head was larger than that of an ax made for splitting wood, and he swung it like a batter warming up, and though the rubber grip had burned away and the metal was wet, it felt good in his hands. Maybe he'd keep it. He walked with it back down to the *Isabella* and again climbed aboard, and he was about to take a full cathartic swing against the planks of the hatch when it occurred to him that they could sail this very boat up to Randall. The winds by late morning were westerly, and they could follow the shoreline generally north on a single tack and be there faster and with much less effort than walking. And the sails were the ruddy, uneven, washed color of red dirt, and he liked the name. So he set down the ax and jumped onto the dock again and went back to his ruined shed and dug around in ash so fine and wet it turned to paste where he stirred it. Against the far stem wall, in cinders burned hard like clinker coal, he found the bolt cutters. The rubber grips had melted off this, too, but the handles and the blades, though seared, were usable.

He cut the padlock off the boat and went down into the cabin, which was lit by a skylight and rows of high windows. In the tiny galley was a single cupboard with a half-eaten box of Oreos in a Ziploc and three cans of Dinty Moore beef stew. Good enough. He'd kill for some coffee. He was about to search for chest storage under one of the benches in the saloon when he saw on the cushion a paperback book titled *The Outermost House* with a bookmark partway through, and next to it a teddy bear and a plastic superhero. A wave of nausea shuddered, and he grabbed up the book and went up the four steep steps into the open and gasped for fresh air and did not vomit.

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They didn't make a fire this time. They opened the cans with their folding clip knives and ate the beef stew with plastic camp-spoons. Just as good cold, once they scraped away the white layer of clotted fat at the top. They were both impatient to get moving, though had anyone asked they wouldn't have known why. Because they were in the wake of a rolling catastrophe, moving behind some malign harvest whose shape and intention they could only guess, and neither could have articulated why that was so. They could just as easily have fled south. If another bridge was blown they could have tried to swim or wade, couldn't they? But they were not fleeing, they were following. They were both hunters. Were they hunting? No. They were trying to find a working vehicle they could take home. Home for Storey: Burlington, Vermont, where Storey was a professor at the university; it would be a long day's drive from anywhere up here. It was southwest, but the roads in the big woods were so sparse and so harried by lakes and swamps, the fastest route was always due south to Bangor and across. Not an option, it seemed.

So they would walk up along the lakeshore. Now they sat on the log beside the water-soaked ashes in last night's fire ring and scraped the last of the stew out of the cans. Storey said, "It's strange: The buildings are all burned to the ground. Every single one."

"I was thinking that, too."

"In a wildfire, say, that overruns a town, there will be half-burned houses, whole buildings still standing that were jumped and spared. Here everything is gone."

Jess scooped the thick brown sauce from the bottom of the tin and he sucked on the spoon. He could have eaten two more cans. "I got half a pack of Oreos, too," he said.

Storey nodded.

"There's a lot that's strange." Jess looked into the empty can with real sadness. "Do you want me to go down and look for more food?" He didn't tell Storey about the doll and the teddy bear and how he had dreaded boarding more boats and had returned. Storey already knew, and shook his head. "Randall is a shore town, too. Bigger. On the map there's a marina. Should be plenty more boats. We can get lunch there. And more."

Get lunch. Like a plan to visit some eatery. Words it seemed now from another era.

"Do you think they're dead? All of them? We saw so few bodies. Maybe they took everyone out before they burned it." "Maybe. I think they hit it from the air first."

Scorched earth. Indiscriminate. Easier from the air. Neither said it.

“So I was thinking we could sail,” Jess said. “The food came off a twenty-four-foot sloop. The sails are on the halyards and reefed. The wind is picking up and we could be there in an hour.”

“No.”

“Because we’d be so visible?”

“Yes.”

“This thing, whatever it is, is not looking back. Doesn’t seem to be.”

“We don’t know where it’s looking. So far it...they...keep moving. But—”

Storey stopped midstream, as if he could not carry the weight of everything he did not know. He set the can on the damp duff and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. Storey had a wife and two daughters, eight and fourteen. These were three of the things he did not know about, and every once in a while they overtook him. Jess thought that it made him more cautious, because—to be blunt—he had more to live for. Jess asked himself if he, Jess, was cavalier with his own life, and if so, was it because he had no children and no longer had a wife. He didn’t think so. On all their hunting and canoe trips and travels in the past, he, Jess, was the one more willing to take risks. If he wanted to sail it was because there was a calculus of energy conservation and he figured that the energy they’d save on the boat might be energy that later on would save their lives. But was that it, or was he just lazier than Storey?

Storey collected himself and dropped his hand from his face. “It’d be like breaking cover and shouting, ‘Hey, over here! Look!’ You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“We can

walk.”

“Yeah.”

Jess saw Storey dig for the phone in the pocket of his pants again, tap the airplane-mode icon off, and check. A gesture now almost reflexive.

Jess said gently, “Storey.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t check so often—”

Storey lifted his eyes. They were flat and bleak.

Jess said, "To save battery. And we should turn one off. For later. For emergencies."

"I've got one portable charger. I'll...I'll turn off mine." "For emergencies?"

Jess blinked. He turned and let his eyes travel down the hill, over the charred townsite. "Yeah." He swallowed. "I know."

One thing he did know was that Storey was worried sick not only about the safety of his family during a civil convulsion, but also about what Lena and the girls would be going through in their panic to reach him. If this was secession or something like it, Lena would have heard by now. She was also a professor at UVM, political science, well connected both in Vermont's contingent to Washington and in the state Legislature, and she would be using those connections and lighting up dozens of phones in a frenzy to find her husband. And she would not be able to insulate her daughters. Andrea, the older sister, was a star cross-country runner and also suffered a form of anorexia and was super-sensitive. She was at serious risk, and upsets and trauma revved up her disorder. When their cat, Coco, had been hit by a car last year, Andrea had lost so much weight the doctor told Storey and Lena that even with extreme intervention she might die.

Jess also knew that the home screen on Storey's phone was a photo of Lena and the girls on a bright, windy day, pressed all together against the rail of a ferry deck and smiling wildly. There was the gray-blue of Lake Champlain behind them, and the distant blue ridges of the Adirondacks beyond. They were going backpacking for the weekend. Lena's ponytail was pulled through the band of her hat, but Andrea, who at fourteen was nearly as tall, wore her tracksuit jacket and her long hair loose, and it blew across her mother's face. Little Geneva tucked up into her mother's armpit like a fledgling and grinned uncertainly, and held her hands out as if to beseech the unbridled beauty of the day to calm down a little. Jess knew that Storey probably lit his phone as much to take solace in the picture as to check for a signal.

"Okay," Storey said finally. "I'll go easy with the phone and you keep yours off. Good idea."

Nobody had to suggest they break down the shelter. They devoured the two stacks of Oreos and stood in unison and went to the olive nylon tarp and unstaked it and unslung the parachute cord from between the trees and folded the sheet and coiled the line. They packed up and shucked the rain gear and hefted the packs and rifles and walked out to the edge of the trees.

For some reason Jess held on to the firefighter's ax. He snugged it through the ice-ax loop on his pack and strapped it tight. The fog was thinning now and spuming over the water in spectral tatters that merged and moved past each other. The two men descended the aisle of an ash-blown street, and when they intersected the larger thoroughfare that became the highway they turned left and walked out of town. On the two-lane county road the remains of burned foundations spaced wider and wider apart, and they followed the