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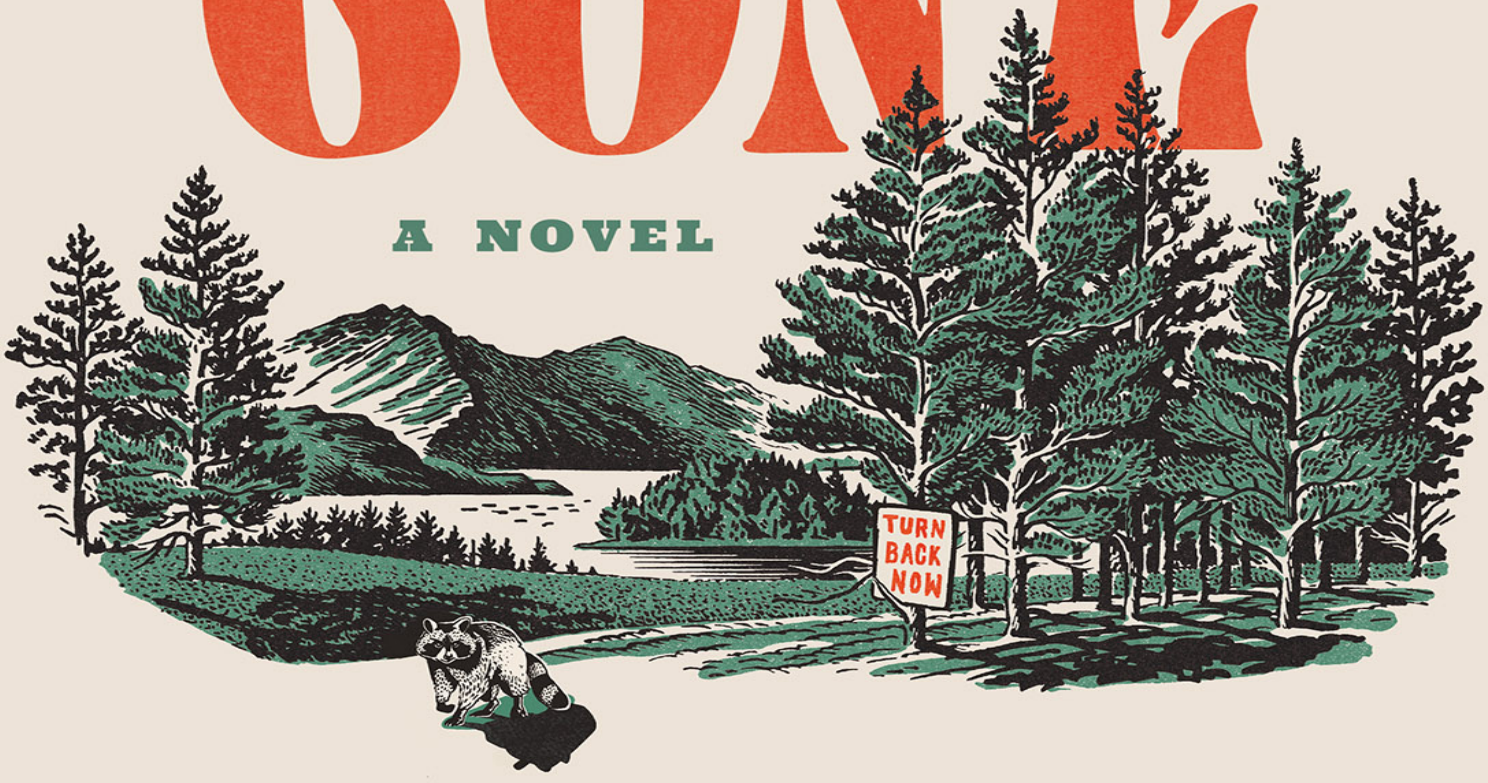
SO FAR GONE

A NOVEL



SO FAR GONE

A Novel

Jess Walter

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Dedication

To my family

Epigraph

Not till we are lost . . . till we have lost the world,
do we begin to find ourselves.

—Henry David Thoreau

Contents

One
What Happened to Kinnick

A prim girl stood still as a fencepost on Rhys Kinnick's front porch. Next to her, a cowlicked boy shifted his weight from snow boot to snow boot. Both kids wore backpacks. On the stairs below them, a woman held an umbrella against the pattering rain.

It was the little girl who'd knocked. Kinnick cracked the door. He rasped through the dirty screen: "Magazines or chocolate bars?"

The girl, who looked to be about ten, squinted. "What did you say?"

Had he misspoken? How long since Kinnick had talked to anyone? "I said, what are you fine young capitalists selling? Magazines or chocolate bars?"

"We aren't selling anything," said the boy. He appeared to be about six. "We're your grandchildren."

A sound came from Kinnick's throat then—a gasp, he might have written it, back when he wrote for a living. *Of course* they were his grandchildren. He hadn't really looked at their faces. And this strange woman on the steps had thrown him. But now that he did look, he saw family there, in the pronounced upper lip, and the deep-set, searching eyes. No, clearly this was Leah and Asher. Christ! When had he seen them last? He tried to remember, straining to apply an increasingly muddled concept: time. His daughter had brought them up here for a short visit one afternoon. When was that, three years ago? Four?

Either way, these were *not* strangers selling candy for their school. These were his *grandkids*, flesh and blood of Rhys Kinnick's flesh and blood, his only child, Bethany. But older than six and ten. More muddled time work was required to figure out how much.

"Mr. Kinnick?" The woman with the umbrella was speaking now.

"Yes," he said. "I'm Kinnick." He addressed the kids again. "Is . . . is everything . . . Are you . . ." The thoughts came too quickly for his mouth to form around them. He opened the door wider. "Where's your mother?"

"We're not sure," Leah said. "Mom left a couple of days ago. She said she'd be back in a week. Shane left yesterday to find her." This was *thirteen*-year-old Leah. Her father was Bethany's old boyfriend Sluggish Doug, long out of the picture.

The boy, eight, no *nine*! Nine-year-old Asher was Shithead Shane's kid.

Oh, the riddle of time—and of Bethany's taste in men.

Kinnick looked at the woman behind his grandchildren. She was Black, with big round glasses, in her thirties, if he had to guess, roughly his daughter's age. She climbed the last step onto the porch.

"I'm Anna Gaines," the woman said. "My husband and I live in the same apartment complex as Bethany and Shane. This morning, Leah came over with this." She held out an envelope. On it, written in Sharpie in Bethany's handwriting: "FOR ANNA." Below that: "in case of emergency."

"Mom left it in the closet," Leah said, "in one of my snow boots."

Kinnick opened the front screen, came out, and took the envelope. He removed a single sheet of paper, handwritten on both sides in Bethany's neat, backward-leaning script. He patted his shirt pocket for his readers, then squinted to make out the note:

Dear Anna. If you're reading this, I had to leave in a hurry. I know this is a lot to ask but can you take the kids to my father, Rhys Kinnick. He is a recluse . . .

Kinnick looked up. "I am not a recluse." He looked down and began reading again.

Dear Anna. If you're reading this, I had to leave in a hurry. I know this is a lot to ask but can you take the kids to my father, Rhys Kinnick. He is a recluse who cut off contact with our family . . .

"I did not 'cut off contact.' It was—" Rhys felt his blood rising. "Complicated." But his grandchildren just stared at him, apparently as uninterested in nuance and complexity as everyone else in the world. Kinnick grunted again and went back to reading.

Dear Anna. If you're reading this, I had to leave in a hurry. I know this is a lot to ask but can you take the kids to my father, Rhys Kinnick. He is a recluse who cut off contact with our family and now lives in squalor . . .

"Squalor?" Kinnick looked around his covered front porch. "Squalor?" In one corner, a broken old refrigerator stood next to a stack of used boat and car batteries and a burned-out inverter generator; in the other corner was his old wringer washing machine and a single clothesline, from which hung a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. "What is this? *In case of emergency, go find my father and make him feel terrible about himself?*"

His grandchildren continued to stare. Kinnick groaned again, then resumed reading, vowing to make it through the whole letter this time.

Dear Anna. If you're reading this, I had to leave in a hurry. I know this is a lot to ask but can you take the kids to my father, Rhys Kinnick. He is a recluse who cut off contact with our family and now lives in squalor in a cabin north of Spokane, in Stevens County. He lives off the grid and doesn't have email or phone. Go north out of Spokane on Highway 395 for thirty-five miles. At Loon Lake, turn onto Highway 292. Drive five miles, and at the T, go right, in the opposite direction of the Spokane Indian Reservation. Go through the little town of Springdale, then turn left onto Hunters Road, and drive ten miles. You'll come to another dirt road on the left that crosses a small bridge, drive another quarter mile until you see a culvert and two tire tracks cutting through a stand of birch trees on your left. This is Dad's driveway. It is unmarked. Drive up a small rise and you'll see his gray, cinder block house at the base of a hill above a stream. A warning, my father can be rather acerbic—

"Acerbic?" He let the letter fall to his side. "Seriously, who asks for help this way?" Still, in a flash of pride, he admired the rich language—*recluse*, *squalor*, *acerbic*—Bethany still had a way with words. At one time, he had thought maybe she'd become a writer, like he used to be, but she lacked the patience, he supposed. Or maybe the confidence.

Then something else occurred to him, and he looked down at the girl. "What about your grandmother?" But, as soon as he said it—

"Grandma Celia died," Leah said.

Asher nodded.

"Oh, no," Kinnick said. "When?"

"A month ago," Leah said.

"Oh, Celia." She'd always exuded a sort of frailty, as if she didn't belong on this plane of existence. Kinnick fell against the doorframe, his side cramping. No wonder Bethany had run off. Her mother had been the closest thing she'd had to a compass.

"Grandma got lymphoma," Asher said. So strange, such a big word coming from such a small mouth. Reminded him of Bethany when she was little.

"Oh, Celia," Kinnick said again, and his eyes got bleary. He pictured her as she'd been when they'd first met, at the University of Oregon library, forty years ago, her long hair swishing side to side like a show-horse's tail. He was studying botany and natural sciences; she wanted to be a nurse. He remembered her asleep, turned away from him, the high curve of her cheekbone. Had anyone ever slept so peacefully? He used to put a hand in front of her mouth, just to feel her breath, make sure she was still there. They married a year after meeting, then finished grad school, welcomed Bethany into the world, and started their life together—until that life, like everything else decent and worthwhile, began to crack.

"I'll bet she was a wonderful grandmother," Kinnick said.

"Yes," said Leah, her brother nodding at her side.

Oh, poor Celia, Kinnick thought. And poor Bethany. He didn't picture her as she was now, lost mother to these two kids, but as his big-eyed baby girl, lying awake in bed every night, waiting for a story from her dad. And now, that girl, that woman, that mother, was without a mother. Oh, poor Bethany. And these poor kids, grandchildren he hasn't seen in years, that he hadn't even recognized on his front porch.

Rhys Kinnick nearly doubled over with a previously undiagnosed condition: regret. And this single, overwhelming thought: *What have I done?*

He cleared his throat. "Come in," he said to his grandkids. He opened the door wider. "Please, come in."

* * *

The dam burst seven and a half years earlier, in Grants Pass, Oregon, 2016, forty minutes before Thanksgiving dinner, when Rhys Kinnick realized there was no place left for him in this risible world. It happened during a televised football game, of all things, Kinnick's son-in-law, Shane, running the remote, along with his mouth. Celia's new (old) husband, Cortland, snoring away in a recliner. Rhys sat helplessly between the dim husbands of daughter and ex-wife, quietly nursing his fourth beer. He was a terrible nurse. This patient wasn't likely to make it, either.

Kinnick had agreed to drive ten hours from Spokane to Grants Pass for one more attempt at a calm, blended family holiday. "No politics," Bethany had proposed, or maybe pleaded, Kinnick quickly agreeing to terms. He was the first to admit that he could get worked up talking with Shane about the recently decided dumpster fire of an election, and that, in Shane's words, he was still "butt hurt."

"I told Shane the same thing," Bethany said. "No religion. No politics. Let's just try to be a normal family."

Normal. Sure. Family. Right. And the first two hours were fine. Leah colored, Asher toddled, small-talking adults small-talked. So far so—

Then Asher went down for a nap, Leah went off to play dolls, Celia and Bethany drifted into the kitchen to cook dinner, and Shane immediately launched into his nutty Christian nationalism rap: "It might make you feel better, Rhys, to know that this was all prophesied in the Book of Daniel—"

—it did not make Rhys feel better—

"—that a king would rise up in the West to make his nation great again," Shane said, cracking a pistachio shell and eating the nut.

"Two thousand years ago," Kinnick said into his beer. *And*, he thought, *spoiler alert: Didn't happen then, either*.

"The Bible speaks to us in *our* time, in every time," Shane said. "Revelations 22:10: '*Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand*.'"

Rhys had promised Bethany and Celia he wouldn't make trouble, so he merely thought his answer: *Yes, Shane, you know-nothing know-it-all, the time IS at hand, present tense, meaning 95 AD, when some long-dead author wrote that allegorical nonsense about the brutal reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, not about immigration or the deep state or whatever bullshit you're confused about today*.

Next to him, Cortland—fifteen years older than Celia and as political as a tree stump—hummed in his sleep. Rhys looked around Shane and Bethany's tidy living room, with its cursive needlepoint (*Bless the Lord, O, my soul*) and framed Jesus-at-Sunset posters (*Praise Him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens*).

He glanced back at Shane, all self-satisfaction and mudflap mustache, chomping pistachios. It was blissfully quiet for a moment, and Kinnick thought the worst might be over. Then, on TV, a pass interference call went against the Green Bay Packers, and Shane leaned across the recliners and confided to Kinnick: "They're in on it, too, you know."

It, Rhys knew by now, was the elaborate and all-encompassing conspiracy to indoctrinate Americans into a Satanic liberal orthodoxy whose end goal was to subsume good Christians like Shane into an immoral, one-world socialist nightmare in which people pooped in the wrong bathrooms.

Kinnick urged himself to stay quiet. To not ask questions. If you didn't ask Shane for more information, he sometimes just muttered off into silence. Rhys checked his watch. Thirty-five minutes to turkey. He could make that. Surely, he could be quiet for thirty-five—

"Who?" he heard himself ask. "The officials? You're saying the refs are in on it?"

Shane turned his head. "Refs? Come on, Rhys. You think the refs have that kind of power? Think for a minute: Who pays the refs?"

"Okay. So—" Rhys tried to keep it casual, asking over the rim of his beer, "you're saying the National Football League is engaged in a massive conspiracy . . . whose sole purpose is to deny victory to the teams you happen to like?"

"It's got nothing to do with me," Shane said. "It's common knowledge that politics and professional football were rigged the same year—2008. That's when the globalists put forward the final part of their plan: they'd already taken over universities, schools, every level of government, and they were about to give us a certain foreign president whose name I will not say out loud, but whose middle name is Hussein. The final push. They were starting to control sports, too. Don't forget who won the Super Bowl that year."

"No idea," Kinnick said.

"Two thousand eight? The New York Giants? Beat the New England Patriots? Think about it for just a second, Rhys. The *Patriots*? As in the real Americans? Losing to the *Giants*? Of New York? Giants as in the beast that rises out of the sea with seven heads and ten horns? As in the ten media companies and the seven boroughs of New York City? Come on, Rhys, you're a smart man. You think this is all a coincidence?"

"There are five boroughs in New York, Shane. And thousands of media companies."

"Then it's seven million people. I get the numbers mixed up."

"There are eight million people, and I seriously doubt that many lived in New York when Revelations was written."

"I told you: that's not how the Bible works, Rhys. It's a living document."

"It's not, Shane."

"Believe what you want." Shane was getting red-faced. "But I saw a thing on-line that explained the whole deal." He was always seeing things on-line that explained the whole deal. Or deals on-line that explained the whole thing.

"Wait a second," Kinnick said, convincing himself that logic might still matter with Shane. "But the Patriots won the Super Bowl *last year*!"

This, somehow, excited Shane even more, and he leaned in toward Kinnick and confided in him. "I know! That was *awesome*, a sign of the coming triumph, a clarion call for patriots to rise up and prepare for the final fight. See, New England wasn't *supposed* to win. The secular globalists picked Seattle to repeat as champions. But Brady and the Patriots wouldn't allow it.

See? They broke the script. Stole that game at the goal line! Said, 'We will fight rather than surrender to the New World Order!' That's why the NFL had to start the whole deflate-gate controversy. To go after New England. As a warning."

This was the danger of winding up a toy like Shane. He could go on for hours like this, weaving every loose strand into a blanket of conspiratorial idiocy as he explained how, at the beginning of every season, NFL officials and team owners got together with TV execs, who handed out scripts for the season. But in the 2015 Super Bowl, Brady, Belichick, and the brave Patriots refused to go along with the globalist-satanist-liberalist-trafficker agenda, and they struck a blow for the original America! New England! Patriots! Thirteen original colonies!

It was the sort of logic hash that Kinnick had encountered when dealing with conspiracy theorists in his old job as a newspaper reporter, like the logger who once explained to him that some of the forest had been replaced with fake trees that were in fact surveillance devices. Gibberenglish, Rhys used to call it.

"New England's victory was a sign to all patriots," Shane said. "We've been waiting for a king to arise, and now, he was on his way. This election would be our Valley Forge."

"I'm pretty sure at Valley Forge, they were fighting *against* having a king, Shane."

"I'm just saying the call went out," the undaunted Shane said, "and true patriots have answered, and our time is nigh."

"You know what? I got a thing at nigh." Rhys pretended to look at his watch. "Can we do it at nigh thirty? Maybe quarter to rapture?" Rhys glanced over at Celia's husband, a retired high school math teacher—*Are you hearing this?*—but Cortland was snoring away.

It was quiet for a few more minutes, Shane pouting at being teased, Kinnick doing his best to let it go. He would eventually tell Bethany that: *I tried to let it go*.

You egged him on, Bethany would say.

I tried to steer us back to football! Rhys would insist.

"So, they script every play?" he asked Shane. "Or just the final score?"

"I mean, they leave room for ad-libbing, but yeah, everyone basically knows who will win before the game starts. It's been scripted since 2008." Shane leaned across the arm of his recliner. "Think about it for a second, Rhys. There's literally billions of dollars at stake. You think they're just gonna leave that to chance?"

"Right," Kinnick said. "So, the owners get together and decide before the season who's going to blow a knee, who's going to fire a coach, who's going to win the Super Bowl?"

"Owners?" Shane scoffed. "You think the *owners* run the league? Owners are patsies, Rhys! Wake up! You gotta follow the money on a deal like this."

After getting a degree in natural sciences Kinnick had been an environmental journalist for thirty years, at a paper in Oregon, at a Portland magazine that went under, and finally, in Spokane, where the foundering newspaper "offered" him a buyout in 2015. And now, what could be more depressing than his carpet-laying, truck-driving, recovering-addict son-in-law lecturing *him* to *follow the money*?

"This"—Shane held up the remote—"is where the money is."

"Remote controls? Sure." Kinnick leaned in. "So, who's behind it all? Best Buy? RadioShack?"

"Think for a minute, Rhys!" Shane tapped his own head with the remote. "I'm talking about . . . the *media*." Or *me-juh*, as Shane pronounced it, that word being one of the four—*elites*, *liberals*, and *socialists* were the others—that found its way into every Shane Collins conspiracy theory. "And I don't need to tell you who controls the media."

"No, you don't."

"The so-called—" Shane said.

"Please don't say it." Rhys pointed with his beer bottle. And, for a moment, Rhys thought maybe the worst was over, that they'd make it to dinner after all without a problem.

But then Shane added, "I mean, they don't call it *Jew* York for nothing."

"I wish you wouldn't say stuff like that, Shane."

"Hey, I'm pro-Israel! No one loves the Jews more than me. The real Jews, I mean. Jesus was a real Jew."

In his defense, Rhys would later think, he had endured four years of such nonsense, ever since Shane had traded his mild drug habit for a Jesus-and-AM radio addiction—"real Jews" and "real patriots" and "Black-on-white crime" and "owning the libs" and the "lame-stream media" and the "vast conspiracy" perpetrated on "real Americans," by which Shane always meant people like him.

This raw sewage had been seeping into American drinking water for years, until it eventually contaminated the mainstream, and won over enough Shanes to convince the chattering TV heads and Twitter-taters that such half-assed conspiracies were a legitimate part of the body politic, that somehow, they had to do with white, working-class people getting the short end of some imaginary economic stick.

But fine. Shane could believe whatever he wanted.

It was Bethany who broke his heart. Once-brilliant Bethany who should've known better, but who pretended, maybe for her marriage's sake, or her kids' sake, that this was all okay. Bethany who practiced a quiet, metaphoric faith, but who kept the peace by going along with Shane's crazy eagle four-wheel-drive oppo-Christian patriotism, watching quietly as he chased blue-eyed salvation with the zeal he'd once chased meth, venturing ever further into the paranoid exurbs of American fundamentalism.

But how far would they go? How far would the country go? A familiar feeling of grim hopelessness washed over Kinnick, the sense that, just when he thought it couldn't get worse, it not only got worse, but exponentially more insane. Some days, reading the news felt like being on a plane piloted by a lunatic, hurdling toward the ground.

And to have his daughter *not see* this, to have her decide that, in fact, it was Kinnick and his reaction that were the problem—*No religion! No politics!*—made him feel so disoriented, so alone, so . . . bereft.

It was while thinking of Bethany, and how close Kinnick had been to her when she was little—that these four, unfortunate words slipped from Rhys's mouth: "Daughter married an idiot."

Shane sat up. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I was talking to myself."

"Did you call me—"

"I'm sorry."

"You come into my house and call me names?"

"I shouldn't have said that." Kinnick stood. "I just need some air."

He started for the door, but Shane leaped out of his recliner and blocked his father-in-law's path. "Why do you get so bent out of shape, Rhys? Is it maybe because I'm getting close to the truth?"

"Yeah, you got the truth surrounded, Shane. Now, please, I need some air."

Shane grabbed Rhys's arm and lowered his voice. "Sit down, Rhys."

"Let go of my arm, Shane."

"Please." His grip tightened. "Bethany's gonna get mad at us both."

Rhys yanked his arm away. "Get out of my way, Shane!"

Their raised voices brought Bethany from the kitchen. "Dad, what's the matter?"

"Nothing." Rhys pulled away. "I just need some air."

"Your father called me an idiot!"

"Dad!" Bethany said.

Rhys put his hands out. “I can’t do it anymore, Beth! It’s like talking to a belt buckle!”

“I begged you both,” Bethany said. “No politics.”

“I wasn’t talking politics!” Shane said. “I can’t even talk about football without your dad losing it!”

Celia came in from the kitchen, too, still holding the turkey baster, long gray hair piled and pinned atop her lovely head. “What did you do, Rhys?” His ex-wife and daughter stood there, at the edge of the TV room, staring at him accusingly, Shane blocking the door, Kinnick breathing heavily, looking for a way out, and on the wall next to the door and his escape, more framed needlework: *This is the house the Lord has made.*

“Time to eat?” Cortland stirred in his recliner.

Kinnick could feel his chest tightening, his pulse racing. He was surrounded, smothered, claustrophobic. “Really, I just . . . need some air. Let me go outside for five minutes and—”

Bethany crossed her arms. “Dad, do not leave this house—”

“I’ll be back. I just—” Rhys tried to edge past his son-in-law.

But Shane grabbed his arm again, leaned forward, and hissed, “Don’t be such a snowflake, Rhys.”

He hadn’t hit another human being in thirty years.

And then, in a flash that would replay over and over in his mind, he had.

It was a streak that ended satisfyingly at first, and then—not so much.

* * *

Leah stood just inside Kinnick’s front door, looking around her grandfather’s little house in the woods. A fire crackled in the old-fashioned woodstove at the center of the room. A dented tin coffeepot percolated on one of the burners. As she’d heard from her mother, the only electricity in the house came from car and boat batteries that Grandpa Rhys charged with rigged-up solar panels and propane tanks. But it wasn’t neat and futuristic, like she’d imagined. It seemed dirty and half-finished. Decrepit. He had no television or computer. He didn’t even have a phone. This was what it meant to live *off the grid*. There was a bathroom, the tap water and small handheld showerhead coming from a tank hooked to an electric pump powered by one of the marine batteries he had sitting around. But if you had to use the toilet, you went outside to an outhouse. Like in olden times. Like in the Bible. There were candles and battery-powered lanterns all about the room. A small refrigerator was plugged into a portable generator. There were no pictures or art on the cinder block walls. Instead, the house seemed to be

bursting with words, bookshelves covering every wall and blocking two of the windows. Books were double- and triple-stacked next to piles of magazines and spiral notebooks. Books covered every available surface and much of the floor. Leah loved books more than she loved anything in the world, but this . . . this seemed like a sickness, like an infestation of words.

"Are these all yours?" Leah asked, picking up a hardcover book called *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*.

"Yes." Kinnick scratched his head, as if the very idea made him uncomfortable. "I mean, as much as we can own books. I get them from libraries and yard sales, but they aren't technically *mine*. They pass through me." He looked down then. Laughed at himself. "Forgive me. I'm rambling, I'm not used to— My thoughts are—"

He turned to Mrs. Gaines and cleared his throat. "—discordant. Would you like some coffee, Mrs.—"

"Gaines," she said. "No, thank you." She was looking around, too, at the ancient coffeepot, at the books, at a corroded battery sitting on the floor next to a 1950s hi-fi, also covered in books. Her hands curled up like she was afraid to touch anything.

The smell was something Leah hadn't been prepared for—woodsmoke and musty books and what she thought must be Grandpa Rhys himself, some mixture of sweat and dirt and coffee and age.

Kinnick kept looking from Leah to Asher and back, muttering. "Kids don't drink coffee, right? No, of course not. I have bottled water. You want water? Or dried berries? Beef jerky?" He started clearing space on the two reading chairs, the only real furniture in the room, other than the hi-fi and the library table, which was also covered with piles of reading material.

"Please," Kinnick said, when he'd carved two hollows in the grove of literature. "Sit down, sit down." One of the stacks began to list and Kinnick righted it. "Sorry about the— Obviously, I wasn't expecting— It's a little—" The stack fell in the other direction, and Kinnick watched it helplessly. "Bestrewn," he said.

Oh, what words! Leah couldn't help but smile. *Discordant! Bestrewn!* This was the mysterious grandfather she'd imagined, back when her only real impression of him was the smart-looking photo on the back of his book, *From River to Rimrock*, which for years had been filed on their mother's bookshelf back home in Oregon, in the *K*'s, as if her father were just any other author. (It was what Leah wanted, as well, to be a writer one day, to create a series of fictional stories about two young Christian heroes living and adventuring and ultimately falling in love in the end-times.)

"What's Grandpa Rhys's book about?" Leah had asked her mother once, when she was younger. When Bethany responded that it was a book of essays, Leah had asked, "What are essays?"

"Well," her mother had said, "essays are stories for readers who care more about ideas than they do people."

Leah remembered the crisp judgment of that description, and she remembered the last time they had come up here, to see Grandpa Rhys, almost four years ago now, at the beginning of the pandemic. As she recalled, the drive had seemed to take forever, and then, when they got here, they hadn't even come inside. Instead, they'd walked along a stream, throwing rocks into the water while her mother talked in hushed tones to Grandpa Rhys. She could tell something was wrong. After an hour, they said their goodbyes, and she and Asher and their mom had gotten in the car and driven back to Spokane to see Grandma Celia, her mom stifling tears as she drove. *He's so far gone.* This was the report she'd heard her mother give Grandma Celia: *so far gone*. Still, she'd imagined some hope in that phrase: *so far* . . .

But this craggy, bushy-haired, bearded grandfather didn't look much like the tall, trim, dignified man she recalled from that earlier trip, and certainly not like his square-jawed author photo from twenty years ago. He wore a heavy flannel shirt over what appeared to be a lighter flannel shirt over what appeared to be a once-white T-shirt, now a dirty beige-gray color that Leah might have called *twice-plowed snow*. (It was a hobby of hers, naming new colors. Shane once said she should go to work for the big paint companies.) Kinnick's face was gaunt and his long, unkempt brown hair was streaked with gray (*hash browns and country gravy*) while his shaggy beard was dusky white (*high winter clouds*). Whiskers migrated down his neck nearly to his chest and up his cheeks, nearly to his *regret-to-inform-you* blue eyes.

"So, Leah, your grandmother—" Kinnick's voice cracked. "Was she sick a long time?"

"No, not very long," Leah said.

"And Cortland, he was with her?"

"Grandpa Cort's in a nursing home," Leah said.

"When we visit, he thinks we're his brother and his sister," Asher added. "He plays with dolls. It's called regressing."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Kinnick said.

Leah nodded. "Mom was planning to come up here and tell you when Grandma got sick, but she asked Mom to wait until she was done with her treatment and then—"

"And then she died," Asher said.

“It happened fast,” Leah agreed. “We moved up here from Oregon so Mom could take care of her and a few months later—”

“She didn’t want a funeral,” Asher said. “She got cremated.” Then, he leaned forward, as if confiding in his grandfather. “That means turned into ashes.”

Kinnick wanted to go back a few steps. “So, wait, you’ve been in Spokane . . . this whole time?”

“For about five months,” Leah said. “Mom wants to go back to Grants Pass now. But Shane has been wanting us to move here for a long time. He says it’s safer up here. Because of the redoubt.”

“The—” Kinnick cocked his head.

“Redoubt,” Asher said. “The safe zone for Christians.”

“It’s different places in the mountains of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana,” Leah added helpfully. “Like a fortress built in a bunch of different places.”

“It’s where the Rampart is,” Asher said.

“The Rampart?”

Before they could explain, Anna Gaines stepped in. “Mr. Kinnick, I have to ask, are you . . .” She looked around the house. “I mean, can you take care of the kids for a while? Until Bethany comes back?”

“Tell him about my tournament,” Asher said from one of the chairs, his legs pressed together, big snow boots swinging above the floor.

Mrs. Gaines looked pained. “Asher has a chess tournament tonight.”

“Tonight?” Rhys ran his hand through his hair.

“Yes. At six p.m.,” Asher said. “I was the number-five ranked player in Southern Oregon. This will be my first tournament in Spokane. Mom registered me for it.”

Anna said, “He’s very worried about missing it.”

“I’m a prodigy,” the boy said.

Leah sought out her grandfather’s eyes and gave him a small shake of the head meant to convey, *No. He’s not*. Asher had, indeed, been the fifth-ranked eight-year-old in the Southern Oregon Chess Club. But that was among the seven eight-year-olds who had qualified for ranking.

“Dad and Pastor Gallen are praying about whether chess is a Godly endeavor,” Asher said. “It comes from the Arabs, which Pastor Gallen says is bad, and Dad is worried the board represents the illuminati and has graven images. But Mom says I can keep playing while they’re discerning.”

“Discerning.” Kinnick closed his eyes, overwhelmed by all of it: redoubt and Rampart and the illuminati and discerning whether chess was a Godly endeavor. He breathed in heavily, and back out of his nose.