

ONE

I was sitting at the edge of the clearing, trying not to stare at the body on the ground in front of me. Dad had said we'd be done before dark, but it had been hours since the sun went down and he was still only waist deep in the hole, throwing shovelfuls of dirt over his shoulder.

Even though it was covered in the burlap shroud I could see how wasted Grandpa's body was. He'd always been thin, but the infection had taken another ten pounds off him before he went. His hand fell out from a tear in the burlap. Shadowed from the moonlight, it was a desert plain, the tracks of the veins like dry riverbeds winding up the crags of his knuckles. A gold Marine Corps ring sat on one finger, but it barely fit anymore.

Dad's shovel chewed through rocks and clay with an awful scrape. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore and escaped into the thicket of trees that surrounded us, stumbling through the darkness until I came to the edge of the hill we were camped on.

Far below were the slouching ruins of an old mall. Rows of cars, rusting in the moist air, sat in the parking lot, still waiting for the doors to open. Beyond the mall, the arches of a McDonald's sign hovered like a ghost.

I remembered seeing it for the first time, ten years ago. I was five and then the sign had towered in its red and gold plastic. It seemed gigantic and beautiful. One trillion served. Now fingers of vines crept up its base, slowly consuming more and more of the rusty metal.

I wondered how long it would be until they made it to the top and the whole thing finally collapsed. Ten years? Twenty? Would I be Dad's age? Grandpa's?

I took a breath of the cool air, but the image of Grandpa's hand lying there on the ground loomed in the back of my mind. How could it be so still?

Grandpa's hand only made sense in motion, rearing back, the gold ring flashing as it crashed into my cheek. He had so many rules. I could never remember them all. The simple act of setting up camp was a minefield of mistakes, and Dad and I both seemed to trip over every one. I could still feel the sting of the metal and the rasp of his calloused skin.

But that's over, I told myself. *We're on our own now.* Grandpa's fist was just another bit of wreckage we were leaving behind.

"Stephen!"

My chest tightened. It wasn't cold enough for a fire, but I didn't want to go back with nothing to do so I collected an armful of wood and brush on the way. I dropped it all between our sleeping bags, then leaned over the tinder, scraping the two pieces of my fire starter together until a spark caught. Once I had a proper campfire, I sat back on my heels to watch it burn.

"Think it's deep enough yet?"

Dad was leaning against the wall of the grave, his body slick with sweat and dirt. I nodded.

"Come on, then. Bring the ropes."