

1



The sun slipped behind the ridgetop to the west, the woods darkening at midday like Waldo County, Maine, was Alaska in winter.

Mosquitoes were stirring, deerflies backing off. Crows harried something high in the trees, and I saw the flash of a hawk's silhouette, then wing-flapping shapes in pursuit. And then the crows were gone and it was the buzz of bugs and the snap of Clair's lunchbox latch.

Our break was over.

Clair climbed up and into the cab of the skidder, under the roll cage. He got situated and I started his big Ford pickup, waited for Louis to hoist himself up onto the seat. We pulled out, the truck lurching over the ruts we'd worked into the forest floor. Clair started the skidder and it clacked to life with a puff of diesel smoke, and he followed us up the rough path through the dark, dappled trees.

We'd been hired to do a careful cut of forty acres of hardwood—maple and oak, mostly—for sawlogs. The parcel was part of more than a thousand acres owned by Mrs. Hodding, who was eighty-seven and in assisted living in Rockport, twenty-five miles to the east. Mr. Hodding, who was ninety-one, and for a quarter century had had Clair look after these woods like they were the king's forest, had suffered a stroke. In the time it took for the blood clot to move to Mr. Hodding's brain, assisted living turned to acute care.

Mrs. Hodding needed money, and fast.

She called Clair. He called us. We put down everything we were doing and loaded up our gas and oil and chain saws. In my case, that meant temporarily trading writing newspaper stories for dropping sixty-foot trees. Louis came up from his hideaway in the deep woods near Sanctuary, twenty miles to the south. Clair left his tractor at home, loaded up the skidder, and we went to work.

Cutting massive trees, their crowns crashing to the forest floor. Limbing them until the trunks looked like the torsos of dismembered bodies. Wrestling heavy steel cable around the logs and jumping back as Clair skidded them away to the wood yard. Stepping up to the next trunk with a chain saw, leaning into the spume of chips and exhaust.

This was the third day in the late-September heat and we were bone-tired. Dirty. Smelled like oil and gasoline. The truck lurched and rocked.

“Iraq, women used to spend a whole morning looking for wood, come back with this pathetic little bunch of sticks,” Louis said, looking out the truck window at the wall of trees.

“What a few thousand years of human habitation will do for a place,” I said.

“It isn’t all desert,” he said. “There’s farms and orchards and groves of these weird olive trees. Not what people think.”

“Most things aren’t,” I said.

“You’d think you’d figured it out, even a little,” Louis said, “and it would change in an instant. Kaboom.”

And then he was quiet. We drove on.

The logging road was blocked by dead trees, the debris of ice storms and lightning, the passage of time. With Clair following on the skidder we stopped every twenty yards or so and got out and hacked our way through brambles, sawed the skeleton-dead limbs and tossed them to the side of the trail. We could have rammed the stuff out of the way with the skidder but this was cleaner, the way Mr. Hodding liked it.

The trail eventually emerged in Hyde on the other side of the hardwood ridge, the northeast corner of the Hoddings' land. We drove a quarter mile and crested a rise—and there was a wall of fresh slash.

It was a pile of branches ten feet high and it blocked the trail forty yards ahead. We heard the sound of distant chain saws and the roar of a diesel, saw blue smoke wafting through the green-brown woods to the right, like the wrong color in a painting.

“The old lady hire two crews?” Louis said.

“No way,” I said.

“Then what—”

“Outlaws,” I said. “Figure nobody will notice.”

Louis and I turned as Clair rumbled up behind us on the skidder and climbed down, leaving the motor running. He walked up and Louis said, “We’re not—”

“At the end of the parcel?” Clair said. “Not even close.”

“There must be some confusion,” I said.

I smiled. Clair smiled back.

“Well, let’s go see if we can’t straighten that confusion out,” he said.

Clair took point, then Louis and me, the two of them—Marine and army veterans—moving easily in single file. I tromped along like a reporter and tried to keep up. We passed the brush piles, the leaves shriveled at the edges but the centers still pale green.

“Two days,” Clair said.

We kept walking, down the trail to the left, and eventually came on a truck, a dented primer-black Ford one-ton with dual rear wheels and ratty stake sides. Up close we saw a red dump sticker from Monroe, a couple of towns to the west. The truck bed was full of prime oak sawlogs, twelve-footers someone had winched up a makeshift steel ramp. There was a stack of logs off to the side. Thirty yards beyond the truck, a battered flatbed trailer was parked to the side of the path.

And just beyond the trailer, a small bulldozer was rumbling out of the woods.

The bulldozer was painted camouflage green, like army surplus, and it was dragging a foot-thick log, leaves dragging at the end of a jagged limb. The driver's back was to us, as he turned to watch the tree. He dragged the trunk out onto the trail and then reversed to slacken the cable, and jumped down.

Looked up.

Saw us.

Froze.