CHAPTER 1

The Man with the Cane

Daniel Reeves had a rule for the drive home. He would not look at the river until he had to.

He kept to it for the first hundred and ten miles, which was easy, because Ohio between Columbus and the Tamarack Valley is mostly corn and billboards. He kept to it through the last long grade, where the road tilts down and the whole valley opens like a hand. He kept to it right up to the Route 9 bridge, where the guardrail ends and there is nothing to look at but water.

The Tamarack was high and brown and in no hurry. It slid under the bridge with a sound like a long exhale, carrying a whole fence post along with it, and Daniel gripped the wheel and thought: *there you are.*

Then he looked at the dashboard clock. Six-forty. The sun was down behind the ridge, and the sky over Cedar Landing had gone the color of a bruise healing.

He had told his mother he would arrive by four.

His left foot had other ideas about most things now. It had been stopping every thirty miles to complain, and he had been stopping with it, pulling into rest areas, standing at the open door of the truck with the cane hooked over his arm while the nerve pain walked up the back of his leg and settled into his spine like a tenant. The orthopedic surgeon had a name for it. The physical therapist had a different name. Daniel had his own, and he did not say it in front of the cane.

The truck was an old green Ford with a dent in the tailgate, borrowed from the department motor pool guy who owed him a favor. His whole life from the last eight years fit in the bed: four boxes, a duffel, a boot bag he could no longer use, and a framed commendation he had wrapped in a sweatshirt so he would not have to see it.

He crossed the bridge. Cedar Landing began the way it always had, with the grain elevator on the left and the Sunoco on the right and a hand-painted sign that said **WELCOME, HOME OF THE 1994 STATE CHAMPION CEDARS**, the paint peeling off the word *champion* in long curls. Somebody had added a vinyl banner underneath: **FALL FESTIVAL OCT 18. PIE. BE THERE.**

He almost smiled. Then he turned onto Front Street and the town came at him all at once, the way it does when you have been gone too long.

Maggie's Diner, with the lights on and two trucks out front. The Methodist church and its sign, which said **WORRY IS A MISUSE OF IMAGINATION.** The post office. The brick building with the faded white letters across the second floor, REEVES HARDWARE & LUMBER, EST. 1962, where he had learned to cut keys at nine and sweep sawdust at ten and lie to his father about nothing at all, because his father had never asked a question he did not already know the answer to.

The lights were on upstairs. His mother was waiting.

He drove past.

He did not decide to. His hands turned the wheel at Sycamore, then at Hollis Road, and he was ten minutes down a dark two-lane before he admitted what he was doing. He was putting off the porch light. He was putting off the way his mother's face would do something careful when she saw the cane, and the way his father would look at the cane and then at the floor.

He had spent nineteen weeks being looked at. By surgeons, by therapists, by a chief in a dress uniform who had stood at the foot of his hospital bed and said the words *line-of-duty disability retirement* as if each one cost him money. By the guys from Engine 9, who came by in twos and threes, loud at first and then quiet, because there is no good thing to say to a man who will not climb a ladder again.

Pity had a smell, Daniel had learned. It smelled like flowers and hand sanitizer.

He did not want to arrive in Cedar Landing in a cloud of it.

The road ran beside the river here. He had not planned that either. Through the trees on his right he could see the water gleaming dully, wider than he remembered, and on the left the fields rolled away into dark, and there was a mailbox shaped like a barn with a name on it he could not read at this speed. He slowed down to look at the lonely light of a farmhouse.

That was why he did not see the dog until it was in the road.

It came out of the ditch low and fast, a long brindle shape with its ears flat, and it did not run so much as lurch. Daniel stood on the brake with his good foot. The Ford fishtailed on the wet gravel at the shoulder, and the world swung sideways, headlights sweeping across a fence, a field, a leaning gray mailbox, and then the truck was still, shuddering, nose down in the ditch with the engine ticking.

His heart was going like a kick drum.

Fear, he noted. Adrenaline. Both useful, once. He breathed the way they taught you, in for four, out for six, and checked himself in order the way he would check a patient. Hands, fine. Neck, fine. Back.

His back had gone silent, which was never good. It meant the pain was gathering itself.

Then he heard the whimper.

It was under the truck. Daniel stared at the dashboard for three full seconds. Then he put the transmission in park, found the cane on the passenger seat, and opened the door.

Getting out of a truck in a ditch with a ruined left leg is a project. He did it in stages. Right foot down on the gravel. Both hands on the door frame. A long second to let the leg catch up and agree. The cane came

last, planted wide, and he lowered himself the way you lower a ladder in a high wind, rung by rung, not trusting any of it.

The dog was lying flat in the headlights' edge, in a puddle, shaking.

It was a hound or mostly a hound, thin enough that he could count the ribs, with a notched ear and one front paw held up off the ground. It looked at him with an expression he knew too well. It was the look of someone waiting to find out how much trouble they were in.

"I didn't hit you," Daniel said. His voice came out rough. He had not spoken to anyone since the rest stop in Mount Vernon. "I'm almost sure I didn't hit you."

The dog let out a long shuddering sigh and put its chin on the ground.

"Okay," Daniel said. "Okay. That's fair."

He went down on his good knee, which cost him, and held out a hand. The dog sniffed his knuckles and licked them once, apologetically. There was a collar, a frayed red one, with no tag. There was a smell of wet fur and old straw and something sweet, like feed.

Daniel ran his fingers down the injured leg the way he had run them down a hundred scared strangers, and the dog let him. Not broken. Strained, maybe. A thorn buried in the pad. The hound watched him with those mournful eyes, and something in Daniel's chest, which had been shut for nineteen weeks, shifted a quarter inch on its hinge.

"You belong to somebody," he said.

"He belongs to me," said a voice in the dark. "At least, he does this week."

Daniel looked up.

A flashlight beam came toward him down the shoulder, bobbing, and behind it a figure in a rain jacket two sizes too big, a ball cap, a dark ponytail pulled through the back. Whoever it was moved quickly and carefully, the way you walk on a surface you know well. A second,

smaller shape trotted at her heel, a shepherd mix with three legs, hopping with total commitment.

The beam found the truck, the ditch, the dog, and then, last, Daniel's face.

It stopped there.

For a moment, nothing in the night moved. The river went on talking to itself behind the trees. The shepherd sat down. Rain, which Daniel had not noticed starting, began to tick against the metal of the truck, fine and soft.

He knew the voice. He had known it before the light reached him. He had known it, he understood now, since he turned off Sycamore, which was why he had turned.

The flashlight lowered.

Eight years is a long time. It had taken the girlishness out of her face and left something steadier there, with lines at the corners of the eyes that had come from squinting into weather. She was thinner. Her hair was the same. Her mouth was the same, and it was pressed into a line he remembered very well, because he had spent the better part of a decade trying to forget it.

"Hello, Daniel," Emily Carter said.

He could have stood up, and he started to, and his leg gave him a short, humiliating answer. The cane skidded on the wet gravel. He caught himself against the grille of the truck with one hand, and it hurt, and he held on anyway.