

**GIVE UP
THE DEAD**

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GIVE UP THE DEAD

A JAY PORTER NOVEL

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For Troy
Brother, I miss you like hell . . .

**GIVE UP
THE DEAD**

CHAPTER ONE

DINNER WAS NICE. Not the meal so much. The only restaurant we could find open on Thanksgiving was Denny's, and you never walk out of Denny's saying, "That was a good decision." But spending time with my wife and son, just the three of us, the way it's supposed to be—the way it used to be—at least for an hour or so, I was happy, content, at peace. Then her new husband picked them up in his nicer car, and I had to say goodbye to my family in an overcast parking lot as the cold November winds blew.

I tried to rub feeling back in my leg. The nerve damage from an accident three years ago always hurt worse in winter. The pain radiated down my calf, shot into my ribs, jabbing my heart. I dropped my plastic bag of turkey leftovers, lit a cigarette, and tried to forget where it all went wrong.

I was failing miserably when my boss, Tom Gable, called.

"Will you be able to make an auction tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Hate to ask on Thanksgiving. But I got the wife and in-laws at the house, and Freddie is crawling up my ass. This fella, Keith Mortenson, flew in from North Carolina. He's clearing out the family estate. Old money. Real antsy to get back. If we don't host, he'll go to Owen Eaton, and we lose the commission. Supposed to be some bargains."

Wasn't often we got asked to auction on a holiday. In fact I couldn't remember having done one before. And I'd been clearing estates for Tom Gable since high school.

"Besides your usual percentage," Tom said, "how's three hundred sound?"

Sounded pretty fucking good. I was hurting for cash, and I needed something to do with my evening. All I had waiting for me at home was a dumpy one-bedroom above a filling station and a fat cat with whom I didn't particularly get along. Staring at a three-hour drive back to New Hampshire, long stretches of desolate highway, with too much time to think, I would've done it for free. Not that I was telling Tom that.

"Give me a few," I said. "I'm still in Burlington." I didn't need to mention what I was doing there. Tom knew about my life.

"Plenty of time. Auction doesn't start till seven. Dulac said he'd open the shop. Stop by my place. I'll give you the money."

Jacques Dulac rented the other half of the warehouse, a gardening supply outlet that didn't do much business this time of year. During slow months he didn't mind if we stashed our showcase on his side of the room. But that meant when the night was over, I'd have to drag everything back to our side. Total pain in the ass. Which was why I was stoked Tom had acquired a new warehouse in Pittsfield. With way more square footage, the new space was big enough to house a permanent display *and* host sales. No more rolling stones up a hill.

I flicked my burning cigarette into a snow bank and hoisted my gimpy leg inside the Chevy. "On my way."

"Thanks, Jay. I don't know what I'd do without you."

An ice storm poised to slam us that night. Winter had gotten an early start this season. Life on the mountain. I punched the truck in gear and tried not to think about temporary dinners,

permanent missteps, and the possibility of different lives. This afternoon my wife and son were on loan. Seeing Aiden, now almost six years old, hearing the stuff that would come out of his mouth, the one-liners and comebacks, knowing I wouldn't be around to catch those little moments killed me. I turned up the radio so I didn't have to think. Springsteen didn't help.

By the time I crossed state lines I'd worked myself up. It's not the proms or weddings, the driver's license tests or Little League games. I'd catch the big stuff. The real remorse rooted in the mundane, the day-to-day. Silliness around the breakfast table, family movies on a snowy night, hot chocolate, decorating a tree, someone else playing Dad.

Another reason I was grateful for Tom's call. If I focused on work, I could avoid wallowing in the shallow ends of self-pity. And for the first time in a long time, I had my eye on the prize. Tom Gable was getting out of the antiques game. He wanted to sell. And he wanted me to buy.

"I'm tired of busting ass up here," he said. "Winter lasts too damned long on this mountain. And I've always liked you, Jay."

I liked him, too. But mutual admiration wasn't making me forty grand richer. I'd need at least that much to get a loan. My entire life I never enjoyed more than a thousand bucks in the bank. Jenny and her new husband may've shared a big house in the swanky suburbs of Burlington, but I was struggling to keep my head above water in Ashton. Tom and I had a handshake agreement. One year to come up with the cash. Otherwise he'd be forced to sell to Owen Eaton and the Clearing House.

By the time I got to Tom's farmhouse in the foothills, the sky had fallen hard, a slate curtain lowered. Tom met me on the porch with a fat envelope. He was drunk, the big man unsteady on his feet, another reason not to get behind the wheel on these twisty,

frozen trails. Sounded like a helluva party inside. I peered around my boss' hefty frame, smelling hot brandy, apples, and cinnamon. House was packed, a middle-aged rager. Old-timey Christmas music blared. I saw his wife, Freddie, who smiled and waved me in. I held up the envelope, and she returned an understanding nod.

Tom clasped my shoulder. "Thanks, Jay," he said, slurring, leading me off the porch to my truck as silver flakes floated down from the heavens. "Really bailing me out."

"Not a problem."

"Really bailing me out," he repeated.

On my way off the mountain, I got a call from my buddy Charlie, who was at the Dubliner, the pub on the other side of town where he spent most nights, drinking beer, playing darts, wasting his life. He'd often try to drag me down with him. I usually begged off. I had to be up at the crack of dawn, and at almost thirty-five years old, I'd grown sick of the bar scene. I heard the desperation in his voice tonight. Even though I was running late, I invited him along, hoping he'd say no. He jumped at the offer. After his latest DUI, Charlie wasn't able to drive, so I had to pick him up. I tried to convince myself it's always better to have an extra set of hands, even if Charlie's bad back and lazy disposition made him a lousy helper. Divorced or never married? What difference does it make? Holidays suck when you're alone.

"How's this work?" Charlie asked as we walked in the warehouse, ice shellacking snowdrifts into frozen waves like some post-modern sculpture. Several trucks cluttered the lot. Lamentation Mountain always bore the brunt of nor'easters.

"You never did an auction for Tom?"

After I quit the business a few years back to try my hand at corporate, a brief experiment that did not end well, Charlie left

the phone company to take over for me. Sort of. Charlie was a shiftless employee, and Tom stopped using him.

“I guess Tom didn’t trust me with that much money.”

Charlie’s current gig was milking workman’s comp for a back injury he sustained climbing telephone poles. His back *was* messed up. Putting on the pounds hadn’t helped. He looked like Jon Favreau, improbably fatter every time I saw him.

The showroom crazed chaotic, merchandise being wheeled in, set up, staged. I pulled my notepad and started taking inventory.

“How was dinner with Jenny and Aiden?” Charlie asked.

“Fine.”

In addition to cataloging, a painstaking task, I was also doing surveillance, scoping out what to bid on. I was rolling with five large in my pocket. There were certain items Tom always liked to target—dining- and living-room sets were a favorite because of the considerable markup—but I had leeway. Right now I had my eye on a Horner end table and Claremore sofa. The Flemish buffet looked good, too. I began adding dollars and cents. A 10 to 15 percent markup was my sweet spot.

“Was he there?” Charlie asked.

“Was who where?” I spotted a Serapi carpet. New, those things went for ten grand.

“Y’know . . . him?” Charlie mimed jerking off, my nickname for Stephen, Jenny’s new husband.

“Are you fucking serious? No. Just us three.”

“That was nice of him.”

“Of *him*? Yeah, he’s a real fucking sweetheart.”

First time I met Stephen, I almost punched him in the head. And that was before he was fucking my wife. I still called Jenny my wife. Didn’t matter that we had been divorced for three years, which was almost three times longer than we’d been married.

Jenny and I had been together since high school. Someday we'd all sit around the table—me, Stephen, Jenny, Aiden—a modern TV family. I was fine with that day not being today.

“I mean, it's his family, too.”

“They were my family first.”

I led Charlie across the floor. A group of buyers huddled around a dark oak Wright Mansfield sideboard and Mid-Century Modular sofa. I was about to put in a bid when I saw Owen Eaton, the other man standing in the way of my dreams.

Almost didn't recognize him at first—Owen, too, had packed on a few pounds. Everyone got fatter but me. He was talking to a slight, brown-haired man, off to the side, whispering. When he spotted me, he whisked the little man outside, beelining to gladhand.

They say the mark of a man is how he treats others who can't do anything for him. By that standard, Owen Eaton was a prick. Unless the guy personally profited, you might as well be squeegeeing windshields at a traffic light. Cozying up to me wasn't helping his chances of buying Tom's company. That he'd come rushing over, chirpy as a junkie following a fix, a dead giveaway something was fishy.

“Who was that?” I asked, pointing out the back door where the brown-haired man had been jettisoned.

“Oh him?” Owen said, dismissing my query as if I'd just asked about the key grip in a B-movie. “Keith Mortenson.” Like the guy who'd orchestrated today's major sale of high-end merchandise was but a minor detail.

They were still rolling in bigger, more elegant pieces. Milo Baugham loungers, Soren Georg rocking chairs. Not the kind of score you often found in Ashton. Why was a guy who lived in North Carolina in such a hurry to hawk gems like this up here?

There were pieces from all over the world. Each part of the globe carries unique markers. Europe, South America, Mexico. To the trained eye, even gold sparkles differently.

“Not bad,” Owen said, eyes roving disinterested over the room, a con man’s lowball strategy. “Might be a decent find or two.”

“Who’s helping you tonight?” I asked.

“Flying solo.” He feigned consideration for his underlings. “Didn’t want to bother my men on Thanksgiving.”

“Charlie,” I said, nodding at a Wepner stool on the other side of the room. “Do me a favor. See what they are asking for that?”

“Huh?”

I pointed at a stool I didn’t give two shits about. Tom already had a set.

I waited till he was gone.

“What’s the deal?” I said.

“Same as you. Tryin’ to land a few quality—”

“Cut the shit, Owen.” The Clearing House was big enough to employ top-flight appraisers, a whole division for purchasing. “Spare me the holiday crap.” Owen Eaton would turn out his own mother on Christmas if he thought she’d fetch a nickel.

Owen glanced toward the back door. I pushed past him, bulling outside into the dark parking lot and biting mountain air.

The man he had been talking to, Keith Mortenson, waited across the snowy gravel, beside a small moving van, its doors closed. He squinted in our direction through the slashing sleet.

Owen came trotting after me, reaching for my arm, out of breath.

“You’re trying to buy a piece off-site? In *our* parking lot?”

“No, we were about to . . . Okay, you caught me,” he said, hushing his voice, which was a stupid precaution, since Keith Mortenson couldn’t hear us above the swishing winds. Owen feigned a smile,

but it came out more a leer. “Tried to sneak off without payin’ the taxman.” He pulled a fifty from his clip.

How stupid did he think I was? Confessing to a lesser crime so I’d look past the elephant hiding beneath the bedsheet. Classic misdirection.

I nodded at the moving truck. “What’s he got in there? Don’t bullshit me.”

“Chaucer antique French-carved dresser display cabinet and sideboard.”

In decent condition, the eighteenth-century piece could be flipped for twenty tomorrow. Excellent condition, twenty-five wouldn’t be out of the question.

Keith Mortenson, with his limp hair and tender frame, didn’t have a clue.

“What are you offering?”

Owen fumbled with his hands, chewing on the inside of his cheek. I started toward the truck.

“A grand,” he said.

“You’re a dirtbag.”

“I’ll cut you in, Porter. A thousand to keep your mouth shut. Pay Tom his percentage. Or don’t. You come up big just by walking away. What do you say?”

If Owen was giving Mortenson a grand and offering me a thousand more not to say anything, he already had a buyer.

“How much are you selling it for?”

“I’m not at liberty—”

“Hey,” I called out to Keith Mortenson. “Open that truck.” Mortenson checked with Owen. “Don’t worry about him,” I said.

Owen muttered obscenities while Keith Mortenson opened the doors.

Holy shit.

I climbed in the back of the van and pulled the flashlight on my phone. Not a single ding or dent. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

“My . . . mother’s . . . old dresser.”

“Did she ever use it?”

“Huh?”

“Mr. Mortenson, that is an antique. One of a kind. Vintage. Top of the line. Mint.”

My news didn’t register.

“I’ve been in estate clearing most of my life,” I said, hopping down. “I have never seen a piece like this.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that man there—” I glanced over my shoulder, not bothering to shield my disdain “—is trying to fuck you.”

Owen Eaton wedged in front of me, in full spin mode. The snow and sleet had begun accumulating at our feet. A fierce howl ripped up the ravine, making it hard to hear.

“Antiques are a tricky business,” Owen said. “Not an exact science.”

“Don’t pull that horseshit. You know how much this is worth.”

“Yeah? And where do you suggest Keith here go?” He appealed to Mortenson, before glancing up at the unforgiving sky. “You need to get home to North Carolina? Feel free to try the pawnshop.” He pretended to check his watch. “They’ll be open in another twelve hours.” Owen laughed like we were all old pals. “This is why you come to men like us. Yes, I plan on makin’ money. That’s my job. I’m giving you a fair price.”

“The fuck you are, Owen.”

Mortenson looked to me. “My wife’s waiting for me. I have a flight to catch.”

“Tell you what,” Owen said. “I can go as high as two five.”

“A real fucking prince.”

“Do better.”

I had five grand in my pocket. Cold, hard cash. I knew I could get *at least* twenty. I mean, I was pretty sure. But it wasn't my money. “Can you give me a minute, Mr. Mortenson?”

“Maybe he can,” Owen said. “But I can't. This storm is getting bad. I need to get on the road. Listen, Keith, I will pay you three thousand. Right here, right now. But I need your answer.”

I could go all in. I had wiggle room but I couldn't go entirely off script. I knew Tom would love to quadruple his money. If I was right.

Keith Mortenson checked with me one last time.

What could I say? Owen had called my bluff. I wasn't a gambler.

“Just make sure we get our cut,” I said.

Owen handed me back that fifty and added one more. “Keep the change, Porter.”

I headed inside and let Owen complete his swindle. So much for being noble. Mortenson was handing over the prized possession. Owen Eaton was about to make a killing. And for my effort? I was out a thousand bucks.

I'd almost gotten to the door when Mortenson called after me, running up and passing me a wadded ball of fabric.

“Really appreciate you doing this last-minute sale, Mr. Porter,” he said.

I opened the gift, holding it by the shoulders. A winter coat. I could use a new one. Mine was threadbare and worn to shit, frayed at the cuffs. I knew I should say thanks, but I'd lost my family, was out a lot of money, and just wasted my Thanksgiving. I wasn't thanking anyone for a fucking coat.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REST OF the night wasn't a total bust. I put in solid bids, brought a decent haul. Sorlie sofa. Pendant chandelier. Travertine end tables. A sturdy, dependable night in which I played it safe, took few chances, and made someone else money. I'd get paid, as always, and when you subtracted bills, rent, child support, groceries, gas, I'd have a couple bucks left over. If I didn't blow it all on Dunkin' Donuts coffee and too many cigarettes, packed my lunches, I'd be able to squirrel away a few nuts for a rainy day. And in about a hundred years I'd have that forty grand I'd need to buy Tom's business. Assuming I didn't die as early as my folks and brother. In my family, mid-fifties constituted old age. The American Dream is terrific, as long as you don't wake up.

After I'd logged items for Tom, I collected fees and said my goodnights, doing my best to smile or at least not scowl. Some day, I hoped, this company would be mine.

Sad as it sounded, my biggest victory of the night might've come via that winter coat. I didn't often get jazzed about new clothes, but when I slipped it on, thing fit like a glove, like it had been tailor-made just for me. I checked my look in the mirror. Heavy, tan corduroy with furred camel collar. Had to admit, felt pretty cool. Also made me laugh. The coat was my first new stitch of clothing in years. Not counting tee shirts that came in a ten-pack. I owned one pair of jeans.

After I hooked up and secured the U-Haul, Charlie wanted me to drop him back at the Dubliner. He had sobered up by then, but of course planned on getting drunk again. Like making your bed in the morning, what's the point? Charlie lived in his dead mother's house on the plains, at least a couple miles away in the deep, dark wood. Staring into that starless abyss chilled me to the marrow. I couldn't fathom making that trek on foot.

"How'd you get down here?"

"Got a bike."

"Like, what, a dirt bike?" Charlie was my best friend, but I didn't see him all that often. I didn't see anybody that often; my closest friends were empty houses and long solitary drives. Still, I figured I'd know if he got a motorcycle.

"Dude, after that last DUI, I can't drive anything with an engine. I mean bicycle."

"We're in northern New Hampshire. It's fifteen degrees." And that might've been optimistic. Ashton was closer to the Canadian border than it was Massachusetts. "You're too old for a bicycle."

I understood riding one in the summer months for exercise, maybe. Although I'd rather shoot myself in the head than get bunged up in skintight latex and a pointy helmet. Charlie was as old as me. At our age, there's a big difference between hobby and necessity.

"Throw the bike in the back of the truck. Let me drive you home."

"Nah." Charlie nodded at the bar door. "Already here."

Fine by me. Truth was, I wanted to be alone. Since the divorce, I'd been hermitting hard.

That auction with Owen Eaton highlighted a bigger problem: I had a tough time pulling the trigger. I didn't think of myself as risk-averse—I'd taken plenty of chances in my life—it's just

that those choices usually turned to shit. My life began spiraling out of control because I'd taken *too* many chances, starting with believing my dead junkie brother, Chris, after he said he'd uncovered a town-wide conspiracy. And it hadn't gotten any better the following year when I signed on as an investigator for NorthEastern Insurance. My last case in Plasterville cost me my marriage. That's not fair to say. My marriage was already on the skids before I met Nicki. And without her help, I wouldn't have been able to uncover the kids-for-cash scandal that rocked the state. Besides, by then I'm pretty sure Jenny was already fucking Stephen. Both Chris and Nicki had been telling the truth. And each time the root of evil traced back to the most powerful family in town, the Lombardis. And up against that competition, I was out of my league. I was done sticking my neck out and taking needless risks. I'd never walk right again. Winning battles at the cost of losing the war is still losing.

I'd reheated my Denny's leftovers, grabbed a beer, and propped up my feet in the recliner, ready to catch a few minutes of highlights from the football games I'd missed, when someone knocked on my door. I lived atop an auto shop, same dumpy one-bedroom I'd rented out of high school. Used to be only Jenny Price or Charlie Finn rang my bell. Now my ex-wife lived a state away with the jerkoff, and Charlie hadn't had time to peddle his little bicycle across the tundra.

I took a bite of cool, rubbery turkey, hoping whoever it was would get the hint. The knocking started up again.

Walking back in the kitchen, I slid the dead bird in the trash, dropped my plate in the sink to signal being pissed, and yanked open the door.

A stocky, well-dressed man, with a head polished shinier than an apple fresh out the tumbler, stood there. I'd never been a suit

guy. Didn't know the difference between an Armani and Men's Wearhouse off-the-rack. Not counting my brief, disastrous foray into corporate, I'd worn a suit exactly two times in my life: when my brother Chris died and when I got married—and even then I'd been rocking the rolled-up sleeves and no-tie look before the priest finished last rites. Part of the reason I didn't fit the corporate mold was my utter disdain for suits.

But I could tell this suit wasn't cheap. The fabric practically shimmered in the stairwell light, individual threads glinting, almost crackling with the sound of crisp hundred dollar bills.

“Can I help you?”

The man extended his hand. “My name is Vin Biscoglio.” I sized up the hunk of gold around his wrist. We auctioned off enough watches for me to tell when one was the real deal. “I was hoping to speak with you. Mind if I come in?”

“Sort of. It's late, man. I'm about to go to bed. Plus, I don't know you.”

Did this dude go around all hours, visiting strangers, thinking his fancy suit and expensive watch was a free invitation?

“Apologies for the late hour. I've been sitting in my car, waiting for you to come home. Must've missed you.” Vin Biscoglio glanced over his shoulder, out the tiny window that framed the white tips of Lamentation, the mountain range that goldfish-bowled our quaint, rustic town. Didn't know what he hoped to find. I'd spent enough time traversing those icy peaks to know the only thing that waited up there was heartbreak. “I promise I won't take up much of your time.”

I couldn't place the accent, but he wasn't from here. I left the door open and headed to the fridge for another beer. I'd been trying to cut down, no more than a six-pack a night. I was better

off managing lingering panic attacks with the pills the shrink prescribed. But beer was still my primary staple.

I snapped the magnet opener off the fridge, popped the top, and lit a cigarette from the stove because, as usual, I couldn't find a lighter or matches fast enough. I'd given up trying to quit. My fat cat walked in the room, rubbing her belly against my leg. I stooped to pet her. Standing, I almost forgot what I was doing because no one was in my kitchen. Guy stood on the landing like the world's most insecure vampire.

What was he waiting for? A corsage?

I waved him in.

I swear if he had a hat, he would've folded it over his chest. For a dude resembling a linebacker able to bench press Humvees, he was oddly nonassertive.

"You want a beer?" I asked. Vin acted like the kind of guy who wouldn't drink anything not aged in an oak barrel. My discount schwill was below his pay grade. But I liked to be courteous.

"I'm okay, Mr. Porter."

"It's Jay. Now what do you want?"

"I need your help finding a missing teenage boy."

I waited for the rest. Because unless the boy had gone missing in some couch cushions, this had nothing to do with me.

But he didn't say anything else.

"I'm sorry a boy is missing," I said. "But, like, go to the cops."

"I'm afraid we can't go to the cops."

"You can't come to me either." I laughed. "I think you have the wrong Jay Porter. I work in estate clearing. Moving dressers, cleaning out the shit nobody wants from dead people's houses."

Vin Biscoglio only stared.

"I'm a scavenger."

Vin glanced around my cramped, ugly apartment, uneasy. “You worked as an investigator for NorthEastern Insurance?”

“Yeah. Worked. Past tense. It’s been a while. And I didn’t exactly set the insurance world on fire. Lasted less than a year. Pretty much got canned.” My stomach gurgling, I made for the fridge, holding open the door. Weak yellow light bled across my floor as I confronted the startling lack of food. Beer, mustard, slab of cold cuts that had turned a funky shade of gray. I think it used to be chicken. Without Jenny, I’d fallen back into the trappings of bachelorhood. Trips to the market were reserved for beer. I picked up most of my food at the gas station downstairs. “How’d you find me anyway?” All I could think was my name remained on the NorthEastern website.

“Your friend Fisher.”

That little mutherfucker.

Fisher was a friend of Charlie. I liked him fine, okay, not really. If it wasn’t for Charlie, Fisher would be off my radar completely. He’d been with Charlie and me when my brother found that hard drive. Fisher worked for NorthEastern, too. But down south, at the big office, in Concord. I hadn’t talked to him in years, but this made sense. Fisher was the sort of guy who would send a stranger in an expensive suit to my doorstep on Thanksgiving.

“Fisher says you may be able to help out.”

“Fisher’s full of shit.” Couldn’t the guy at least call and warn me?

Vin stepped to a rolling side table, which housed Jenny’s old recipes. He plucked a cookbook, held it up. “You like to cook?”

“No.”

Vin Biscoglio placed the book back between the others. He pointed at a kitchen chair. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out.” I wished he’d stop with all the formal crap. He was creeping me out. “You change your mind on the beer, feel free. Need to take a leak, the can is over there. Now finish your pitch so I can say no.” The pause gave me a chance to apologize. You live alone long enough, you forget manners. There was a boy missing. “I don’t mean to be rude, man. It’s been a long day, but I don’t work investigations.”

“You broke the Lombardi pedophile case, yes?”

“We found some pictures. We couldn’t—”

“And your work at NorthEastern in the Longmont kids-for-cash scandal was instrumental in sending Judge Roberts to prison.”

“Not exactly. Sort of. Yeah.” I stopped. “How do you know about any of this?”

I *had* been behind uncovering Gerry Lombardi was a pedophile. Wasn’t easy. There were bikers working security—one nasty bastard in particular named Bowman tormented me endlessly, knocked me out cold, almost killed me. But allegations never reached the press, and no charges were filed before the old man died. Judge Roberts taking bribes to ship kids to private prisons? Sure. And for my efforts, I received a big fucking headache and a whole lot of nothing.

Biscoglio’s demeanor changed, the pretense of politeness gone. I now saw this was a man who wore nice suits because he could afford to wear nice suits, a device employed to get what he wanted. Clothes don’t make that man; he is born that way.

“I know all about Adam and Michael Lombardi’s involvement, too,” he said.

Vin Biscoglio was going for the hard sell. The Brothers Lombardi were my personal bane. During both scandals, they, like me, remained nameless, behind the scenes, at least as far as the

law was concerned, which only intensified my hatred for both. Evoking their names now was a cheap ploy to elicit my help.

“Let me guess,” I said. “This is my chance to put the Lombardi brothers away for good.”

“No,” Biscoglio said. “I’m afraid this one doesn’t have anything to do with the Lombardis.”

It was funny. My brief moment of annoyance gave way to disappointment. No matter what lies I told myself, until the brothers were behind bars—or six feet under—I knew I’d never find solace.

“I bring them up,” Biscoglio said, “because it shows how deep you are willing to dig for the truth. It’s what’s caught the attention of my boss, and why your services are being sought.”

Man, only me.

I hopped up and headed for the cupboard, rooting around. “Who’s your boss?” Pack of stale graham crackers, tin of tuna, can of protein patties that had always been there.

“I work for Ethan Crowder.” Vin Biscoglio waited for my acknowledgment. Name meant nothing. “Steel.”

“You want me to steal something?” I spun around, gunning for the freezer. I remembered I had frozen bean and cheese burritos lurking inside. They were about a thousand years old. Those things never went bad.

“Mr. Crowder is in the steel business. Crowder Steel? Out of Boston?”

I found the burritos buried beneath a crystal ice cave, packed like a prehistoric Mastodon in the glacial shelf. I reached in the utensil drawer for a butter knife. I had no idea who this Crowder was. At this point, I didn’t much care. I wanted those burritos. Solid block of ice. Would not budge. I’d never defrosted the freezer, which left me a very tiny window in which to operate. I jammed and wedged the tip, stabbing.

“Right now,” Biscoglio continued, “Ethan and his wife, Joanne, are going through a nasty divorce. You may have read something about it in the tabloids?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Joanne relocated to the Coal Creek Mountains a short while ago, which is where the Crowder family is originally from, taking their son with her.”

The knife slipped out of my grip and sliced my hand, or as much as a butter knife can slice, more like a serious chaffing, leaving a raised, ragged pink line. “Fuck!”

Biscoglio startled. I sucked on the meat of my palm, winding with my other hand to get on with it.

“Their son, Phillip, is caught in the middle. He’s a good kid, but he’s fallen in with a rough crowd, experimenting with drugs. Small-time stuff. Pills. Pot. Mrs. Crowder, Joanne, has taken drastic actions. We think she has had Phillip taken, against his will, to one of those military rehabs you have up here. Are you familiar with Middlesex County?”

I shrugged, nursing my wound. Middlesex was untamed wilderness rife with doomsday preppers, halfway houses, and radical recovery types. My brother had spent a lot of time up there when we were trying to get him straight. So had his girlfriend, Kitty, the mother of my nephew, Jackson. Of course Vin Biscoglio, having done his homework, would’ve known this.

“Place called Rewrite Interventions. Have you heard of them?”

I shook my head.

“Rewrite Interventions employ controversial techniques for teenage addicts. They send someone in the middle of the night, throw a pillowcase over the addict’s head, and toss them in the back of a van, basically a kidnapping. Except totally legal. They take away cell phones. Allow no contact with friends, loved ones.

Even the parents. As a divorced father whose ex has custody of his son, you can understand how terrifying this must be for Mr. Crowder.”

Nice try. “I’m sorry. I still don’t know what this has to do with me.”

“Our mutual friend, Fisher, explained about your brother, your personal interest in drug-related cases. Given your impressive investigating record, we were hoping you might be willing to help. For a fee, of course.”

“It’s late. I have to get to bed. I don’t know what Fisher told you, but I am *not* an investigator. I don’t take on cases or sign clients. Pretty sure you need a license to do that sort of thing, and the only license I have is the driving kind, so I can haul junk. If you can’t go to the cops, hire a private investigator.”

“Mr. Crowder would like to hire you.”

“Tell him, thanks. I’m flattered, but—” I put on the brakes. “I am sorry about the kid. How old is he?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen. Shitty age. Hope it all works out. I have to go to bed, man.”

Vin Biscoglio stood with a gracious nod, returning to his airs. He plucked a business card from his inside pocket, placing it down on the table. “That’s my number. If you change your mind. I wrote Mr. Crowder’s offer on the back.” He closed the door behind him.

Fitting end to a fucked-up Thanksgiving. In the morning I was going to tear Fisher a new one. It was too late to do anything about it now. I walked to the window, making sure the guy wasn’t stuffing auto parts in his trunk. At that point, nothing would’ve surprised me. The snow continued to fall. I didn’t see a car leave. There were no lights below. I had a strange feeling he was still down there. I bundled back up, stepping into my untied work

boots, tramping down the stairs, out into the frigid night. With the wind blowing so hard, I didn't even see footprints. I slid on my cell flashlight. Still couldn't see jack. Not a single print. Not one tire track. Like no one had been there at all.