

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The chill of late February greeted Dennis Bulman as he stepped out of his car. It was at just another fuel pump at just another gas station in just another city—a city he had chosen at random on the map, just like so many other cities before it. Also just like all the other cities, its best quality was that it failed to reveal a straight line to his true destination, which was the Canadian border. By the time he had selected another city, he would have already forgotten this one's name.

Dennis proceeded to fill his gas tank using practiced movements done thousands of times over and rarely thought about, both in his old life as well as this one. As he listened to the hollow hiss of the fuel which funneled into his tank, he pretended to be bored, just another man at just another pump getting gas for just another car—but what he did was watch: The pattern of the traffic on the street, and whether any driver or passenger looked his way; the activities of the family in the van two pumps down from his, and whether anyone was paying attention to him; the girl at the register inside, visible through the glass of the door, and the behavior of the customers inside the station with her. These, too, were practiced movements.

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Practiced movements were best executed, not thought about. It was in the thinking that questions began. Once the questions began, the movements became awkward, mistakes were made, and mistakes had consequences—such as those which now caused him to choose random cities on a map. Such as those which he now tried to outrun.

Not that Dennis Bulman was in a very good position to do much thinking at all anymore. He had not had a decent night's sleep in some time, which had slowed his progress; he had been forced to pull into rest stops every now and again to allow himself an hour (or two, which as the days stretched on became more of a necessity) to nap in his car. It wasn't enough, of course, and the lack of quality sleep had fogged this thinking, muffled his ability to strategize. Each day had grown progressively worse. It was an unsustainable pattern, he knew, but each day brought him closer to where he wanted to be.

Each day also brought him closer to the end of Rob's reach, the hand of which could be one of two men.

Knowing the way one of those hands operated, Dennis had taken extra precautions hoping they hadn't simply cost him valuable time. There were the zigzag patterns he used in his travels: even if his pursuers concluded that Dennis was heading into Canada, they would not know which entrance he would choose (if any, considering that legal access would prove difficult to a United States citizen without a passport or other necessary documentation), and Rob simply did not have enough manpower to watch them all for his arrival; indeed, the frequent course changes of his travels suggested that Dennis was running blind. The license plates on his vehicle (a vehicle which was a common make and model seen thousands of times on any freeway) were not his, and would be replaced with another automobile's sometime during the night, just as they already had been several times over. The winter jacket he was currently wearing was new, and would be replaced by another style in a few more days—along with accessories he wore interchangeably such as sunglasses and baseball caps. In

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this way spotting him from the road was difficult, and identifying him in person would also prove challenging.

But it was a lot of constant work, and he was exhausted. As a much younger man he had pushed himself harder—a great deal harder—and could remember how quickly he recovered. Now pushing hard toward fifty, his gray hairs beginning to outshine the black, the fatigue was draining him. Running his hand over the rough stubble of his face, he leaned on his car. The echo of the fuel filling his tank had become hypnotic white noise, much like the sound of a fast-moving river.

There were mountains here, beautifully visible in the distance and peaked with snow. He allowed his eyes to linger on them, reminded of his childhood in Montana, close to the Idaho border. With a worn smile, he remembered the timid pace of deer, the screech of hawks, and the rushing streams which were broken here and there by spraying waterfalls. Days when his father had still thought of him as his son and the fighting had not yet begun—nor had the drinking, which seemed to serve as a trigger for all the fighting. He had taught Dennis how to build campfires, and had shown him which knot to tie in his fishing line as well as what purpose each knot served. He had taught Dennis how to hike in the wilderness without getting lost, finding landmarks and keeping them within view. Dennis would learn the use of a compass and map later, in the service, but it was his father who had laid the foundation. It was a foundation which had proven solid, and one Dennis counted on to serve him once he finally dared his final approach on the Canadian border.

His father was a man who could not get lost in the woods if he tried to, but one who had certainly lost his way in life despite himself.

Dennis' eyes returned to the sights and sounds of the street, the traffic forming its own sort of river. Mud and slush which had been ice the night before spattered up in dirty fans from spinning tires.

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The sounds from his gas tank changed abruptly, and the lever released with a heavy *thunk!* As Dennis reached for the handle to remove it, he felt a stab not unlike a severe gas pain, high in his stomach. It was at first intense, and then just as suddenly as it arrived, it was gone. But he felt off-balance, and the ground at his feet no longer seemed level. The cars on the street had lost their focus.

Where the stabbing pain once was, there came new sensations: Burning, itching.

Cattail seeds drifted through the air around him and he stared at them, strangely fascinated. As a boy he would often use his air rifle to punch BBs through the fat, brown seed heads of cattails, which would cause them to explode with large plums of cottony seeds, and this was just like that, just like how the wind would catch them and they'd swirl, they'd spin.

But as his eyes regained their ability to focus, Dennis realized he was wrong: While cattail seeds floated like cotton, what he was seeing really *was* cotton. The burn in his stomach had risen in intensity, and the shirt beneath his thick winter jacket stuck to his flesh, wet.

He looked down and was surprised by the gaping hole he saw, bulging with white fluff, at his midsection. He pressed against the area, and it was like squeezing a sponge full of blood—an amazing amount of it, an impossible amount, but there it was.

*Doug. God damn you.*

He forced himself to move, knowing that shock would fully set in if he didn't. Knowing the next shot wouldn't leave him with the option. He threw open his door, his hand leaving thick red smears, and dropped into the driver's seat. He started his car, shifted into drive, and stomped the accelerator. He heard the gas hose as it ripped free of the pump, trailing behind him like the streamer on a kite.

Narrowly missing a small Toyota pickup truck and the cursing man inside of it, he swung into traffic and drove.

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