

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Death of William Boyd

When William Boyd set out to hunt, he kept the joy buried deep. He didn't smile or speak needlessly, and had little patience for those who did. Kirkpatrick believed the same things. Preparation was as personal as prayer and religion: the four o'clock alarm, the ritualistic selection of clothing and weapons and gear, all of it triple-checked and packed to minimize noise. Sound was the killer, as was scent, and both men were acolytes in the church of the hunt. They bathed with special soaps, anointed their rifles with oils designed to be equally scentless. In the gun room, with the air black and still outside, they ate a final meal in equal quiet, the table lit by small lamps, and all else shadowed: the paintings and skins and racked weapons. Silver on china made the only sounds, but the joy showed in neat movements and polished brass and the times their eyes met. They'd known darker mornings in darker places, and there was joy in that, too, in those bindings of trust, respect, and blood.

"It's time."

Boyd fed a final cartridge into his rifle. Across the table, Kirkpatrick stood and shouldered his pack and gun. At the door, the housekeeper handed them coffee in travel mugs. "Three days," Boyd said. "Maybe four."

She frowned. "I wish you'd tell me where you're going."

"You know better than that."

"What if something happens?"

"Risk is part of it. Watch over the house."

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“I’ll be here when you get back.”

He nodded brusquely, feeling the dark charge, the loom of the hunt. It was too early for false dawn, but the sky was peppered with stars. Looking at Kirkpatrick, he said, “I’ll need your phone.”

“What? Why?”

He was a giant in the gloom, and suddenly angry.

“No one takes a phone but me. It’s how this works.”

“I just wired two hundred million to your firm.”

“That’s business, and this is, too. GPS tracking. Photographs. I can’t allow it.”

“I’ve already signed your nondisclosure agreement.”

“My grandfather almost died finding the place I’m about to take you. It’s personal to me. I’m sorry.” Kirkpatrick stared into the darkness, one hand white on the strap of his rifle. “Please, James.” Boyd held out his hand. “This is no reflection on our long friendship or my feelings of admiration.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“Nevertheless.” Kirkpatrick stared at the palm, pale in the gloom. When he handed over the phone, Boyd gave it to the housekeeper, and offered the best smile he had. “She’ll keep it safe.”

“I suppose you’ll blindfold me now.”

“No, my friend. Now we hunt.” Boyd slung his pack and led Kirkpatrick past the line of expensive vehicles to a mud-spattered truck that showed rust and bare primer. “No one around here looks twice at a twenty-year-old Dodge.” Kirkpatrick grunted, and slung his pack into the open bed. Rifles went on the rack in the rear window. Boyd lifted a hand toward his housekeeper. “Four days or less,” he said, then drove them down the twisted drive. At the state road, he turned north and gestured at a line of trees, dense beyond the fields. “That’s the raw edge of fifty thousand acres. No roads into it. No roads out. To the northeast is another twenty thousand acres owned by a paper company in Main. We’ll push in there, go as deep as we can and hike the rest of the way. The country gets rough. It’ll take some time.”

“Better be worth it.”

Boyd said nothing, but his eyes glittered. Kirkpatrick was still

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angry, but that would pass. What mattered was the nondisclosure agreement he'd signed. Kirkpatrick could never reveal the location of the hunt. More important, he could never buy the land or try to buy it, not through intermediaries, subsidiaries, or any other legal fiction. Penalties for violation of the terms were so enormous, the lawyers had balked. But Kirkpatrick was like Boyd. He hated lawyers; loved the hunt.

Forty minutes in the truck brought them to a dirt track behind a metal gate. It was a hint of earth, a slash in the trees. "Paper company," Boyd said. "Sit tight." After sliding from the truck, he cut the chain, then dragged the gate and pulled the truck through. "Four miles in there's a secondary track running east and south. Close as we can get."

"Why come in from the north?"

"The swamp is not navigable."

"Your grandfather managed."

"In the winter. That's different."

Boyd didn't explain the rest, how the swamp had changed each time he tried from the south, how dry land was there one day and gone the next, how trails had disappeared and turned around, how even the compass had failed. The third time he'd pushed in from the old freed-slave settlement, he became so disoriented, he wandered for days and almost starved. By the time he'd stumbled out, he was filthy and snakebit and bloody. Kirkpatrick didn't need to hear that, so Boyd kept quiet as the world shrank to the cab, the feathered trees, the cones of yellow light. Dropping into four-wheel drive, Boyd powered through one creek, and then another. A gap in the trees showed the first flash of yellow eyes.

Whitetail.

Nothingspecial.

When the track split, they turned east and south for another two miles. At the edge of a stream, Boyd ran the truck into the understory. "If anybody finds it this far in, it'll be another hunter or some kid out on a four-wheeler." He killed the engine. "Few come this deep."

"Do any go deeper?"

"Not where we're going."

"Why not?"

"Topography, for one. Then there's Johnny Merrimon. Half the red-

necks in the county think he's some kind of rock star, equal parts celebrity survivalist and rebel, basically a working-class hero. It doesn't hurt that he shot at a couple of Yankees trespassing, or that he went to jail for it and did his time clean. Even those who don't care about the rest of it have a healthy respect for his temperament and marksmanship. Rumor has it, I'm not the only person he's shot at. Then there's the rest of it."

"What do you mean?"

Boyd opened the door. "You'll see."

Taking the lead, he guided Kirkpatrick off the road and across a spongy hollow to a ridgeline running south. In that first hour, the forest was still, but as light strengthened, a dawn chorus rose around them, a symphony of catbird and Carolina wren, of mourning dove and cardinal and the deep-throated *gunk* of green frogs in the pocosins that fingered up from the distant swamp. "Shrub bogs." Boyd gestured that way. "We could save a dozen miles cutting across, but you'd sink to the waist."

Kirkpatrick grunted, and they kept moving, staying to the ridgelines and deviating only if blowdown or deadfall blocked their way. By mid-morning the temperature tipped ninety-five and kept climbing. "You good?" Kirkpatrick said he was, but sweat sheeted his face. Boyd kept the pace, and the route drifted east into the most inaccessible corner of state game lands. "From here on, it gets hard." They moved from damp earth onto gray stone. Except for a few trees, the ridge was barren, with views south across the softer hills and pocosins. Ahead was a series of jigsaw ridgelines with granite so rough, it looked shattered. "Halfway through those hills, we'll reach the northern edge of Merrimon's land. From there we follow the river."

Kirkpatrick shaded his eyes. "There has to be a better way."

"This is the long way in, but no one sees us and we don't get lost."

Kirkpatrick looked doubtful, but kept his mouth shut, and that suited Boyd just fine. He didn't want to speak of satellite mapping or geologists or the local guides who'd shown him how to get this far. "Come on. A few more hours and we're at the river."

As it turned out, it took another five. The climbs were steep, and the stone, in places, sharp as a blade. Kirkpatrick sliced his hand on a bad descent; gashed his knee in a second fall. The heat hurt him, too. By three

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o'clock, he looked like an old man, and Boyd had never seen that before. "Here, take a seat." He found a sliver of shade and got Kirkpatrick on the ground.

Kirkpatrick drank water; splashed some on his neck and face. "I don't get it." He pulled at his collar. His chest rose and fell. "It was hotter in India. The humidity. You remember?" He swallowed more water, choking. His color was bad. "I'm sorry, William. I've never held you up before. I don't understand."

The wash that sheltered them was raw stone, scrubbed by the last big rain. Boyd got the pack off Kirkpatrick's back. "Just breathe," he said.

"There's a weight . . ."

"No, my friend. There's no weight."

Kirkpatrick's hand settled on his chest. "I can't catch my breath. I don't understand."

But Boyd did. "We're on Merrimon's land," he said. "We've been on it for the last hour."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Boyd waited.

"What? Your grandfather's story?"

"Think about it."

Kirkpatrick opened his mouth, closed it. "Jesus Christ."

"It'll pass."

"You feel it, too?"

Boyd nodded, and Kirkpatrick tried to stand. "I can't do this," he said. "I can't breathe." Boyd pushed him back down, but Kirkpatrick fought. "There's something wrong. You don't understand."

"I do," Boyd said. "You want to run from this place. It's like a voice, or pressure—"

"Like someone's standing behind me. Jesus Christ. Like a cold breath and a whisper."

"It's different for everybody. Give it a minute." The minute turned into ten. Boyd thought he'd break a dozen times, but saw the moment Kirkpatrick's breathing eased. The man blinked twice. The panic passed. "You good?"

"I'm not sure."

"Just breathe. The pressure will fade."

"This happens every time?"

"It comes and goes. Sometimes it's worse."

"Goddamn." Kirkpatrick clawed to his feet, then walked down the wash and came back angry. "Why didn't you tell me? Warn me?"

"Would you have believed me?"

"No," he admitted. "Not a chance."

"Can you walk?"

"I'm not frightened."

"Come on, then. This way."

Boyd led him from the wash and pointed. "That's the last hill. Beyond it is the river, and a good place to camp. We'll catch our breath tonight, and start fresh tomorrow. Okay?"

Kirkpatrick said nothing.

"James? Okay?"

"Enough already. I can do whatever you can do."

Boyd had seen that defensiveness, too, a reaction common to strong men made unexpectedly afraid. It was a dangerous state, so Boyd watched him for the next hour, taking him up the hill in easy strides and pausing at the crest. Below them, the river shone like a seam of coal, then broke white for another mile before spreading into the fens and dells that marked the northern edge of the swamp. Kirkpatrick palmed sweat from his face. He looked across the swamp, and his voice was thin. "I had no idea it would be so large."

The wetlands stretched as far as either man could see, a great concavity of life and black water. "Twenty miles east to west. That's Hush Arbor directly below us, three thousand acres of it."

Boyd indicated the area he meant, and Kirkpatrick studied it in grave silence, turning at times to consider the greater swamp beyond. "It looks greener somehow."

"Greener. Denser."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

Boyd moved them back into the trees, where they made camp and

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ate dinner cold. Afterwards, with the sun dim behind the western trees, he asked Kirkpatrick the same question. "You okay?"

Kirkpatrick waved off the worry, but in Boyd it settled deeper. Kirkpatrick looked paler, and the lines of his face were more profound, making him appear haggard and spent. "Can we have a fire?" he asked.

"Not tonight. Too visible."

"Just a small one."

"James, look at me." Kirkpatrick's eyes darted left and right, but never met Boyd's. "Do you still feel it?"

"No. Yes."

"Is it worse?"

Kirkpatrick pressed his palms against his temples, rocking. "I'm fine," he said, but his hands were white.

At dawn, he seemed worse. Boyd handed over a protein bar and a bottle of water, but Kirkpatrick dropped them in the dirt and went to stare out at the swamp. Boyd joined him, and for long moments they stood side by side as an edge of sun put yellow on the hills and left the swamp in darkness. Kirkpatrick broke the silence, his eyes sunken and shot with blood.

"How many times have you been here?"

He was staring at the carpet of trees, the glint of black water. "Three by myself," Boyd said. "Twice more with clients."

Kirkpatrick wrapped his chest and rolled his shoulders inward. "Has anyone ever turned back?"

"From here? No."

He nodded, but it was vague. "I had nightmares last night."

"What about?"

"I don't remember."

Boyd thought that was a lie. Something about the way he stood, the weakness in his jaw. "Come on, my friend." He put his hands on Kirkpatrick's shoulders. "Breakfast will make everything better."

It didn't.

By the time they reached still waters, Kirkpatrick was mumbling under his breath, his back bent under a weight far greater than his pack. Boyd considered turning back, but every time he stopped, his friend grew angry. "Don't stop for me, damn it. I can do this. I'm fine."

For half a day they pushed into the swamp, and every hour Kirkpatrick weakened. He fell often, and Boyd found him unmoving once, a cloud of insects on his face, and his boots held fast in twelve inches of mud. Boyd got him onto dry ground, got him walking. “We’ll stop soon,” Boyd said. “There’s a special place—”

“I said I’m fine.”

But he wasn’t. He wouldn’t drink. The eyes were glassy.

Two hours later, Boyd parted a curtain of vine and pulled his friend onto a spit of land the size of a city block. “This is base camp. This is where we start.” Boyd removed his pack, helped Kirkpatrick off with his. “Sit down before you fall down.”

“It’s worse here.”

“Just sit.”

Kirkpatrick stood, unmoving, as Boyd pitched the tent and gathered wood. When it was done, Boyd took him by the arm and forced him to sit. “Listen.” Boyd looked up, gauging daylight. “We need to scout for a sign, set up the blinds. Do you feel up for that?” No response. Boyd sighed. “Okay, listen. Two game trails lead deeper into the swamp, one running south, and the other west. I’ll go south. The track is just there, beyond the sycamore.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“For God’s sake . . .”

“Whatever it is, it’s getting worse.”

Boyd shook his head.

“Don’t bullshit me, William. I know you feel it. I see it in your face.”

“Yeah, I feel it. But so what? It’s just the air or some shit. It isn’t real.”

“It’s cold. Are you cold?”

“For God’s sake.” Boyd snatched up a tree-climber and a pop-up blind. “If you pull yourself together, I’ll be that way.” He shouldered the rifle, started walking. “Otherwise, I’ll see you tonight.”

Kirkpatrick watched him go, and felt his courage, like a dying match. Everything was weight and ice and hollowness. He stared at gray places between the trees.

Nothing . . .

But the *nothing* weighed a million pounds, and pinned him where he sat. In five decades of living, Kirkpatrick had known such helplessness only once, and that was the day he'd drawn his first breath between the legs of an alcoholic shut-in who'd dropped him like an afterthought on the sheets of a dead man's trailer in the dimmest hollow of West Virginia. He'd come into the world without a father, discipline, or love and never let it slow him down. He'd quit school in the third grade; become a coal miner at twelve, and a car thief six months later. He'd stolen, lied and schemed, and won his first bar fight five years before he was old enough to drink. When his mother died the next week, he buried her in the backyard, then took a twelve-hundred-dollar purse in a bare-knuckle brawl run out of a gravel pit by a sheriff's deputy named Jo-Jo. Those were the years that made James Kirkpatrick, and in the years since, he'd crossed jungles, toppled companies, beaten other men bloody. If he wanted something, he took it. If it bled, he could kill it. In Kirkpatrick's world, there was no mountain he couldn't go over, under, or through. Even now, he thought there was a way out.

Then the *nothing* moved.

Kirkpatrick laughed, but it was more like choking.

It was a trick of light, a shadow.

Then it moved again, a ripple of gray where the light was grayest. It flowed between the trees, and when it stopped ten feet away, Kirkpatrick closed his eyes and remembered what it was to be three years old and frozen in the shell of a lightless trailer.

Something rustled.

The sound of a breath.

Kirkpatrick turned his head, but felt a charge on the skin of his face. He smelled something musty and old. "Please," he said. "I'm sorry."

The world fell utterly still, and Kirkpatrick knew a thousand places he could be touched: the eyes, the heart, the pulse at his throat. He'd read of people awake for surgery, and knew it would be like this: the paralysis and soft places, the feel of fingers inside.

The gunshot saved his life.

It crashed through the trees, echoed off the hills; and in the throes of his fear, Kirkpatrick knew the sound—.308 Winchester, half mile away. In that moment he felt the *nothing's* rage as something touched his face, and his face burned. He screamed for long seconds, and was left suddenly alone.

An empty clearing.

No cold.

But he knew where the *nothing* had gone, and it was to the trail that led south.

Boyd was on the trail south.

His friend.

Pulling himself up, Kirkpatrick felt the battle inside, a great war between the man he'd been and the one he'd just become. He wanted to warn his friend, and wanted to run away. So great was the conflict, he actually whimpered, and that was the sound that decided him. He staggered to the southern trail, and onto it. Right foot. *He would break*. Left foot. *He would fail*.

He ran when Boyd started screaming.

The run took him along the trail, and the weakness disappeared. He was James Kirkpatrick, who'd never backed down or quit or lost a fight. So joyful was he in the rediscovery of self that he didn't feel the trail under his feet or the air that tore down his throat. He was a man, goddamn it, and his friend was afraid or hurt or dying. So he ran harder, faster. He covered the half mile in minutes, then rounded a bend in the trail and felt it break against him—everything he knew, everything he'd dreamed himself to be.

The clearing was a slash of switchgrass and mud, and water so bur-nished and black, it was metal. In the air above that water, the *nothing* had nailed his friend to an invisible cross. He hung in the air, arms out and stretched tight, his legs equally bound. And though no thing touched Boyd—no nails or wood or wire—Kirkpatrick would swear until death that his friend was crucified. Blood welled from his palms and feet. His eyes wept the same red tears. He hung ten feet above the water, screaming beneath whatever pressure unhinged his sockets and twisted his

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bones. Kirkpatrick looked for the *nothing*; couldn't find it. He saw mud, a rifle, the corpse of a gut-shot boar.

"William."

His hands opened and closed.

"William, my God."

Boyd heard him the second time. The screaming stopped; the jaw worked. "Kill it. . . ."

Blood ran from his eyes and dripped off his chin.

"James, kill it."

Kirkpatrick stooped for the rifle, and in the weight of it found the will to work the bolt and feed a cartridge into the chamber. He looked for the *nothing*, but the *nothing* found him first. Water rippled, and a shimmer parted the grass. Cold came with it, and with the cold, a face. A stroke of nothing made the smile. Gray holes were the eyes, and in the eyes was a darkness that moved and mocked and *knew*. It knew the child he'd been, all the regrets and fears and hidden failures. It dredged out the truth of his mother's death, that it wasn't the cancer that killed her, but a vomit-stained pillow and the strong hands of her only son. It knew how he'd wanted her to die, and dreaded it, how she'd begged and soiled herself, and how the bare-knuckle fight that followed was not about respect or money, but the horror of killing his mother, and of being alone in such a dim and shabby world.

"No."

The rifle slipped from nerveless fingers. He'd hated her, and loved her. She'd asked him to do it.

But you wanted to—

"Stop it!"

Kirkpatrick covered his ears, but the voice was inside and sounded like the boy he'd been.

You hated the smell of her and the sound of her and the way she touched herself when she drank—

"Stop it! Stop it!"

But the voice didn't stop. It rolled through him and deepened, and there was laughter when it said, *Run little boy, run.*

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And that's what James Kirkpatrick did. He ran away from his friend and his past; he ran until Boyd screamed again, and even the screams were lost; then it was his breath and his sobbing, and a voice in his head that was his alone. *You're no son*, it said. *You're no kind of man, and no fucking friend, either.*