



PASSENGER

ANDREW SMITH
AUTHOR OF *THE MARBURY LENS*

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ANDREW SMITH



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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For Jean Feiwel

CONTENTS

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Dedication

I. The Odds

II. Bad Magic

III. The Underworld

IV. The Passenger

V. The Arrow

A Passenger's Epilogue

Copyright

Part One

THE ODDS

This is it.

Of course it wasn't over.

Things like this never end.

It has been two and a half months since Freddie Horvath kidnapped some dumb fucking kid who was too drunk to find his way home.

You can't possibly believe things just end, dry up, go away, can you?

Sometimes, when I look at myself, I see the likeness of Wynn, my grandfather, in my face. And I wonder if I'll still be carrying all of this around when I'm his age.

It's not like a sack of garbage you can just drop off at the side of the road and then keep going, pretending you had nothing to do with it in the first place.

Sometimes, it makes me very tired.

* * *

All this time I thought it wasn't me, it wasn't me.

But it was.

* * *

I need to tell you a story.

* * *

The garage steams with the smell of cat piss and something dead. The reek hangs in the still pressurized late-August heat.

Every one of us is sick and scared.

I tell them, "We said we'd do it, and we're going to do it, okay?"

My best friend, Conner, shrugs. "We got no choice."

I would die for Conner Kirk. Sometimes, I think I have died for him dozens of times, over and over again.

Conner looks at the other boys, as if his words are spoken to convince himself more than the rest of us. "Jack and me are leaving for St. Atticus next week. When the four of us split up, you're going to go crazy if you don't have the lens, and we can't just leave it here."

Among all of us, Griffin looks the most scared.

"It's okay, Griff," Ben says. "As long as we're together in this."

I watch a bead of sweat as it arcs up and over Griffin's collarbone, then streaks down his bare chest. And he says, "Well, what are you looking at me for? You were the one who said it was a good idea."

I wonder why I did this to them—Ben and Griffin—and I answer, *They asked me to, they asked me to.*

“The only idea,” Conner says.

I squeeze my hand tight. “I don’t have nothing better. It’s getting late.”

We’re all soaked, but we’re afraid to open the doors. We even put a canvas painter’s tarp over the only window. Conner pulls his shirt off and wipes his face and armpits with it.

I can hear him swallow. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply.

“Keep your eyes up,” he says. And then he looks at me. “Jack? You know.”

He grabs my wrist.

I say, “I know, Con.”

“If we get lost or something,” he begins, but he knows I don’t want him to say any more. Not now.

A ball-peen hammer rests on the table next to the vice. There is a lidless Mason jar with some cloudy paint thinner; the stained handle of a brush tilts against the lip of the inner rim. The things belong to Griffin Goodrich’s dad—Ben Miller’s stepfather.

No one else is home, just the four of us—standing around that workbench, sweating like junkies inside the boys’ unlighted garage.

It is suddenly so loud when Ben cranks the vice open.

One turn.

He lets the knob-ended metal bar drop through its catch hole, and the steely clang makes Griffin twitch like he’s been shocked.

Half an inch.

The Marbury lens is in my hand.

I know what I’m doing, don’t have to see anything.

When I open my hand, it’s like we all gasp for the same shortened mouthful of air—and it’s not enough.

The familiar dull purple glow, like an aquarium filled with smoke and creatures swimming just below the surface of our blurry vision; writhing shadows like pendulous scythes that sweep across the stalks of our legs, asking us to fold before their blades, wanting us to go down into that swirling light.

Conner’s eyes are locked on mine.

“Don’t look,” I say, and my voice sounds ridiculous.

Fingers feel the toothy edge of the vicemaw.

Griffin is shaking, his eyes shut tight. I don’t know if it’s tears or sweat I see on his face.

No. Griffin never cries.

Like Jack.

“Don’t look,” I say again, more to myself than anyone else.

I tighten the vice, let go of the lens.

The swimming shadows boil below us, urgent, pleading.

Just a peek.

Blindly, I reach for the hammer, line it up with my thumb.

I swing.

The lens cleaves. The upper fragment, freed, spins jaggedly through the air and I see flashes like I'm thumb-flipping through a book of unrelated photographs taken by strange hands at different times and places. I feel the broken piece as it lands with the weight of a dead bird on top of my foot.

Screams. Sounds like a slaughterhouse running at full tilt, a jangling of machinery: agonized, pained cries coming from somewhere, everywhere; and I'm thinking, *It's not me, it's not the kids, it isn't Conner*; and I can't see the garage anymore.

Nothing.

No Conner. Nobody.

I fall backwards through the slithering monochrome shapes that writhe up from the floor. I thrash my arms, try to grab hold of anyone, try to shout the names of my friends—I forget how to make the words leave my mouth.

My hand slides over something slick. It is Griffin's arm and I squeeze a grip on the boy and together we fall and fall through the forever of passing images. Endlessly slow and silent, like we are descending; downward through lukewarm pudding.

And I feel my fingers passing through Griffin's arm, like the boy has turned into steam, and all I can feel is a moment of moisture before my hand is empty.

Then I hit.

And I know only two things.

My eyes are closed.

And I am alone.

In time, I gave up worrying about whether I'd lost my mind. It didn't matter. Because my best friend, Conner Kirk, had been dragged beside me into hell. Ben and Griffin, too.

Now they were gone.

It's time to take things apart.

Monsters make monsters make monsters.

Ten weeks before, a man named Freddie Horvath kidnapped me. He was a monster, and I was something like a little bird that nobody gave a shit about.

I fell out of my nest.

Poor Jack.

Since then, all of the horrors that stacked and stacked, layer after layer—the killing on Nacimien Road, being pursued by Henry Hewitt when I was lost and sick in London, stumbling and falling into the nightmare of a place called Marbury that made me feel more at home than I'd ever felt at any other time in my regrettable life—it all turned me into a monster, too.

I could not stop myself from having Ben and Griffin fall with us into Marbury. It was what they told me they wanted, and I believed every sound I'd ever heard in Marbury. So after Conner and I returned from England and found them playing basketball in the park, we could not help ourselves.

Nobody could.

The four of us became willingly trapped.

Now we straddle the gap of nowhere, between this world and the not-world called Marbury. An

Marbury is what we need more than anything.

I can't explain it; that's just how things are.

Freddie Horvath made me into a monster.

I made monsters of my friends: Conner Kirk, Ben Miller, and Griffin Goodrich.

And before Conner and I could leave Glenbrook, California, for the coming school year in Englan

the four of us monsters must divide our pathetic kingdom.

Here, in this piss-reeked garage.

one

I was in the garage.

But it wasn't the garage.

* * *

I rolled over onto my side and watched the gray light coming through the window, now uncovered, a asterisk of jagged fractures in the lower right pane centered in the quadrant of rusting muntin strip like someone had started a game of tic-tac-toe there with a hammer and then gave up.

X.

It all looked so familiar.

But it wasn't.

I don't know how long I lay there like that. There was the loose jumble of disjointed things I knew I was in Mr. Goodrich's garage—I was certain of it—and it felt like I was about to puke, but I had to hold it back, think about something else, because it was my friends' house, after all, and I just didn't want to move yet.

But something was wrong.

I became suddenly aware that I had been drooling. Warm spit ran down my cheek and onto the oilstained concrete floor, and something black scuttled toward my feet.

Griffin's cat, I thought.

And where was Griffin?

Where were Conner and Ben?

I pushed myself up to a sitting position, my legs spread out like arrows, clockhands on the floor.

“Hey,” I called. “Where'd you guys go?”

My clothes were different. The knees on the dusty jeans I wore had been torn through, and I was filthy. Somehow, I remembered it. The shirt hung open, unbuttoned, striped.

I don't have any striped shirts.

One sleeve was rolled to my elbow; the other hung limply, unraveled over my arm, like something dead. A number had been stitched across the left shoulder, above a spot where the pocket had been torn away.

373

It didn't mean anything to me, but I felt that tickle in my head.

I was supposed to remember something.

And I had work boots on.

I wasn't wearing boots. I never wear things like this.

One of them was untied, half hanging off my foot.

Movement again.

The bugs.

I could hear them eating, chewing, burrowing their way into a pile of stained rags crumpled across the bottom of the wide roll-up garage door. But I knew it wasn't rags.

Who was it?

“Hey. Con?”

I gasped, pushed myself onto my feet and immediately fell backward, dizzy. I slammed my hand against the workbench where we'd clamped the lens down in Mr. Goodrich's vice. My foot kicked the hammer; it spun a half circle and pointed to me.

Spin the hammer.

You really fucked up this time.

My eyes darted from the rags, the bugs, to the vice. I saw the lens, broken, dull, like it had been drained of something, and when I grabbed for it, I cut a deep gash across the palm of my hand and watched dumbly as my blood dropped thick and hot onto the floor, splattering the tops of my boots and the smooth wooden handle on the hammer.

The sting felt good.

Get a grip.

I closed my hand, sticky with my own blood, pushed the broken lens down inside my pocket.

Don't look at it.

No. These were not my clothes.

“Griff?”

I took three slow steps—counted them—toward the heap lying against the door. It jerked, electric as the bugs tore into their task beneath the canvas clothing that covered what once was a person.

Cleaning.

Always cleaning away everything dead.

One of the harvesters followed the dots of blood I'd left on the concrete. I heard scraping sounds from its jaws as it tried eating the little bits of me I'd scattered there. I pushed my foot down inside the untied boot and then stomped my heel square across the harvester's shell. It was nearly as big as a cat and it burred a hiss when it broke in two, spastic legs twitching in slick goo, protesting while its cousins came eagerly to pick it apart.

The thing beside the door had been a soldier. His uniform looked the same as those we'd once found on a train, and I couldn't remember when that had ever happened. Trying to figure out where that image belonged in Jack's head was impossible.

The soldier had been dead for some time, too. The bugs kept grinding away at the side of his skull and I saw a jagged piece of what looked like a collarbone being pulled under a lawnmower, five feet away.

I couldn't see the name on his shirt. It was too stained.

I looked back at the door that led into the house—to the kitchen. I had been here plenty of times, took stock of the things in the garage that I knew would always be there. And I looked out the broken window again, could see the ashen sky.

I was in the garage.

And the garage was in Glenbrook, at Ben and Griffin's house.

But this was Marbury.

* * *

I thought if I pressed my palms hard enough into my eyes, maybe it would all go away. But the sound of the bugs kept me there, the sting in my hand, and I realized I had smeared my face with my own blood.

A door opened.

The door to the house.

I jerked.

Ben Miller stood in the dark of the hallway holding a rusted spike of rebar and pointing it out past the threshold, aiming the spear at the center of my chest.

"Ben?"

Ben twitched like the sound of his name punched him square in the face.

He didn't answer. He looked different: thinner maybe. His eyes were sunken and dark and his hair hung down on one side to the edge of his narrowed mouth. It was Ben, but it wasn't Ben.

And he was terrified. Of me.

"Ben Miller?"

I didn't move.

"We don't have any food, kid. I don't know what the fuck you want here. Go back to where you came from, Odd."

I felt dizzy again; drunk. Ben Miller was standing in the doorway, shaking, right in front of me. And I could see he had no idea who I was.

"Don't you know who I am?" I held out my hands. I looked down at myself, at the bloodstained gash across my right palm. I must have looked like a lunatic to him, blood smeared across the side of my face.

I argued like a lawyer in court, "You know me, don't you?" I needed to hear my voice. I didn't want to think it could be possible that I was here, that this was Glenbrook, that we were back in Marbury. But things were different.

Griffin hid behind Ben; I could see his eyes glint when they peeked out around the older boy's tensed arm. He whispered something. Griffin's hair reached his shoulders. He was shirtless, like always, if always had anything to do with where we were. And both of the boys were covered in smears of dirt.

Somehow, I knew we'd all gone back.

But it wasn't the same.

I knew it then, standing in that garage while harvesters picked away at the remains of a dead man and while Ben Miller, this scared kid who didn't know who I was, held me back with a weapon I was sure he wouldn't hesitate to use; while Griffin stood in the dark, studying me, defiant and snout nose unwavering in his determination to keep me away from their home.

Griffin pulled Ben's shoulder and whispered to him again. Then he pointed at me, and Ben said, "I know. I saw it, too."

"Griffin Goodrich," I said. "Your brother. Well, your half brother's name is Ben Miller. Don't you know who I am?"

This time, I heard what Griffin said to his brother: "How does that prisoner know our names?"
Odd. Prisoner. It didn't make any sense.

"We know who you are," Ben said. "But we never seen you before in our life."

I couldn't tell what he meant. His face was stiff, determined, and when I took a step toward the doorway, Ben tipped his spear up like he was warning me back.

"Look," I said. "Are you going to let me in, or what?"

"You can leave the same way you came," Griffin said.

I don't know how I got here.

I put my hands down, looked back at the heap of rags by the main garage door.

"There's a dead soldier back there," I said.

Ben let the tip of his spear clink down on the concrete floor between his feet.

A warning.

"He's there 'cause that's the spot where I killed him two days ago."

Two days. What was two days ago?

"He didn't have any gun or nothing, if that's what you're looking for," Griffin said.

"And we don't have any food," Ben added. He scraped an arc across the floor with the point of his spear, and I could see how it was stained with what looked like dried blood.

Griffin pulled Ben's shoulder down toward his face again. "It's going to rain pretty soon."

"That's not our problem, Griff."

I looked down at the hammer. I looked at Ben.

Come on, Ben. You have to remember me.

He kept his eyes pinned on me, too.

"That door. There. You can go now and we won't tell anyone we saw you. You take one more step toward my house and I'll have to kill you."

Ben Miller wasn't joking.

I glanced at Griffin, then at Ben. The tip of the spear angled toward the side door. Outside was Forest Trail Lane, but there were never any forests in Glenbrook.

And this wasn't Glenbrook.

When I pulled the door open and looked out, I could feel Ben's eyes on me, the same way you watch a dangerous animal until it decided to change direction.

I said, "Try to remember me, Griffin. Ben. I'm your friend."

Then I went outside.

* * *

Everything is scarier, more brilliant and unsteady, when you're alone. After that door swung shut behind me, and I could hear Ben and Griffin on the other side, pushing things around, building

barrier between me and them, I felt like I was walking out into my death.

I looked back along the boys' house, where I remembered a flagstone trail led through a wrought iron arbor to a backyard pool. It was the same house, but sections of the roof were missing. The curved red pottery tiles had spilled down in scattered shards and exposed the tarred and buckling plywood and flapping strips of black felt.

There was wind.

Every one of the windows had been broken, and in places, the concrete stucco of the house's siding had been pounded in as though pummeled by stones or shrapnel. There was no arbor, no flagstone and when I walked around the corner I saw that the pool had been drained, now filled with broken debris: a realtor's FOR SALE sign; part of a wire-mesh picnic bench like the ones they had in Steck Park; a life-sized fiberglass horse—the kind that you'd see on top of a feed store—but this one was headless; and an overturned station wagon that was missing three of its wheels.

And there was no fence, no sidewalks, no street I could see.

Forest Trail Lane.

I could tell where the street was supposed to be. A tilted fire hydrant, the skeletons of things marked a familiar path that was now covered beneath the gray salty ash that was everywhere in Marbury. I thought about my truck, how we'd all squeezed into the cab, sand sticking to our skin when the four of us drove back to the boys' house from the beach.

Before I broke the lens.

I couldn't help myself, and I immediately felt stupid for doing it. I spun around and yelled "Conner!"

Nothing.

"Conner!"

Wind.

Ash.

I whispered, hoping for anything that might connect here to anywhere I knew, "Seth?"

Seth had always been there before. He was the ghost, a part of me, who linked me between the gap in Marbury, home, wherever this place was or was not.

But it was empty. Seth wasn't here, either.

I sat down in front of the house. I knew Ben and Griffin were watching through one of the cracks in their house, ready to fight, to defend themselves.

Against me.

The neighbors' homes were there—some of them. Most had been broken down to the foundation. The others were empty—I could tell—and not just because I could see right through them. There's a silent message you get from an abandoned house that lets you know exactly how things are.

A refrigerator lay on its side in the middle of what would have been the street. Its door had fallen open. There was a man's head inside. I felt the need to go there, make sure it wasn't someone I knew—someone else Jack dragged along with him into this pit.

They had their own aesthetic sensibilities, I thought. The harvesters, the Hunters. They didn't erase everything. They didn't wipe everything clean. They decorated.

I didn't recognize the face. The eyes were squinted shut like they had been stung with vinegar, and the man had puffy cheeks that stretched his mouth into a narrow smile and showed a row of bloodied teeth that all looked ridiculously small.

Welcome back.

It's the same old Marbury.

Jack's hometown.

I started walking.

And I knew where I would go: Conner's house was closer, and then to see if I could find Wynn and Stella's.

All the way down Forest Trail Lane it was the same. Houses were burned or abandoned, things were strewn everywhere in chaotic order, and nothing moved except the small things that vibrated on the wind.

My foot struck against something in the ash. I nearly fell, but caught myself with my hand. The saw had burned in my cut. It was bad. It should have stitches. I thought about how Griffin had never been afraid to do things like that—stitch us up when we got cut.

Whenever that was.

It was a book. I brushed it off and lifted it from the dust. A dictionary.

The cover warped like a dried orange rind; the pages inside pasted together as though the book had been dragged up from the bottom of a sea.

There was a flash of light and something exploded overhead, louder than any sound I'd ever heard. I jerked, curled myself down against the ground.

I need to get out of here.

Out of breath, I watched the sky.

It came again. Lightning. But it was bigger, thicker than any lightning I'd ever seen, and the boom of the thunderclap felt like hammers pounding my brain.

Another hammer, I thought. Maybe it will break me in half, too.

And I'd never seen lightning in Marbury before. Not ever.

The burning light was so thick, so bright, it looked almost crystallized, as though, if I had the right timing, I could swing that hammer and shatter razor-sharp icicles of pure energy from the bolts. And every time they flashed, I felt the electric charge stiffen and prickle the hair on the back of my neck.

At the end of Forest Trail Lane, the old highway ran north and south. It was the main road through Glenbrook before they'd constructed the 101.

This isn't Glenbrook.

On the corner stood the lower half of a two-story. The only thing I could see on the exposed upper floor was a toilet and an overturned bathtub. It still had a ring of dirt around the bottom.

"Prime location for Glenbrook real estate," I said.

My voice sounded strange, tighter. But I knew I'd need to get under something until the lightning stopped, and the bottom level of the shattered house was the closest thing that looked capable of hiding me, so I carried the dictionary under one arm and ran for the doorway.

Another flash of lightning exploded. It hit the street back where I'd come from, sending up

glowing mushroom cloud of ash that seemed to set the air around it on fire.

This was like no lightning I'd ever seen anywhere.

Where the curb would be, I found a rusted yellow Tonka dump truck and one boy's tennis shoe with a picture of a ninja on the side. The ninja had red eyes. The boy who wore that shoe at one time couldn't have been more than five.

Another flash.

I ran.

When I moved, the explosion of thunder was so loud it felt like it lifted me, pushed me toward the broken door at the front of the house. And, dumbly, I stood there for just a moment and nearly raised my hand to knock.

The door had a slot window in the center of it, but the swirled yellow glass had long since been broken, making a lamprey's mouth of needle teeth around the edges of the frame. I saw where the knob, the hardware, was vacant, leaving just a hole through the core. The door pushed easily inward and sucked a breath of air over me as if the house were tasting my scent.

I hesitated.

Another flash spit my shadow across the floor, and before the next blast of thunder came I scrambled inside, pressing the door shut with the heel of my boot.

Then the rain came. It smelled like burning aluminum and fell so thick and heavy that I couldn't even hear the cusswords I yelled.

"Is there anybody in here?"

Flash.

A snapshot image of the house's interior burned into my eyes.

To my left, a staircase rose into the darkness of the ceiling. Somebody had covered the opening to the upper floor, which was now the roof, with corrugated tin that roared and vibrated under the constant downpour. Water trickled in from the sides, spattering down on the house's rotten carpeting. I held my hand under the stream; washed my face. It made me smell like a foundry. There had to be something wrong with that water.

Thinking it almost made me laugh. What could possibly be wrong with anything here in Marbury?

The entryway at the foot of the stairs opened onto what was once a living room and kitchen. I put the dictionary down on a jagged pier of bar top that extended out from one wall. There was something about the book, I thought, that was important.

Something.

Even though the windows had been knocked out long ago, there was hardly enough light coming in for me to clearly see what was around me.

I called out, "Is anybody in here?"

Nothing.

Rain.

"Anyone? I'm alone. I'm lost."

Flash.

It was like a bomb going off.

One of the walls appeared to buckle inward then snap back, like the house was rubber. My eyes scanned across the floor. Junk was everywhere. Pieces of soggy drywall, a hair dryer with its cord tied into a noose, the gutted frame of a television, clothing, the door from a shower stall. I saw a belt, and thought about picking it up, but there was an entire human pelvis, picked perfectly clean, yellowed white, lying among other bones beneath it.

People had been here recently, too. I could smell them. The place reeked like an underground piss in summertime, and the stink made me want to pee, too, so I did it, right there against the wall under the staircase.

Fuck this place.

Flash.

I watched the conical stain of my piss slick downward over the wall. It somehow made me feel good, like I was real, alive.

Another explosion.

I looked at my feet, and that's when I found the knife. Perfect and beautiful, like it had just been purchased at a sporting goods store, and I could almost smell the freshness of its leather sheath. Someone had taken care of it. Someone who didn't need it anymore. I turned it over in my hands, feeling the sharpness of its edge, then unbuckled my belt and threaded the sheath onto my side.

Something crashed into the wall in the kitchen. It sounded like the door on a cupboard. It slammed three more times before I rounded a brick hearth where water splashed down from the shattered chimney somewhere above me on the naked second floor.

A man stood there, kicking his foot against the wood paneling beneath the place where a sign should have been. He was completely naked, deathly pale, but covered with brilliant tattoos all the way from his belly down to the soles of his bony feet; and nothing at all above his waist, just white hairless skin. He looked like a centaur or something.

He turned and glared at me, his jaw working up and down like he was chewing something, trying to get words out, and my hand fell down onto the handle of the knife before I realized it was only a ghost.

Then he vanished.

“Wait! Wait! Please, let me talk to you.”

He was gone.

“Come back!”

I went over to the place where he'd been standing and kicked the wall as hard as I could. I felt the wood cracking beneath my foot, and when I looked down inside the empty black crib where the sign had been, I saw him again—the man—curled on his side, rotting in death.

Rain came straight down from the vacant square where a window had looked out—on what?—from over the sink, and it made his skin slick, snakes and fish, twisted cables of wire and swords, saints and skeletons that vibrated like cartoons inked on his rotting hide. Something black crawled up inside his nostril. I turned away and threw up beside a twisted heap of metal window blinds that was leaning crumpled on the kitchen floor.

Flash.

The lightning came less frequently, but the rain was constant, howling against the tin sheeting and

bare floor above me. I kicked the metal blinds, turning them over. There were maybe a dozen harvesters that scattered out from underneath the heap.

And I saw the body of a little boy there, too.

He had only one shoe on. Nothing else.

I covered him again.

“Fuck!” I staggered out of the kitchen, around the fireplace, the smell of aluminum; the smell of aluminum and vomit.

I shut my eyes, and leaned my folded arms on the broken piece of countertop where I’d left the dictionary.

Flash.

I have got to get the fuck out of here.

Get a grip, Jack. You’re not going anywhere.

Think.

I had to think.

The dictionary.

I peeled through the pages. Some of them tore. Some would not separate at all.

The rain kept pounding.

Pounding relentlessly against the anvil of this wrecked house.

The hammer.

The water came splattering down on the stairway. The stench was nauseating.

I couldn’t hear the bugs. That was good.

I looked up *California*.

There was no such word in the dictionary.

There were no entries for *Washington, America, or England*.

Okay, asshole. Maybe this dictionary doesn’t list the names of places.

So I looked up *earth*. Earth had to be in there, right? It wasn’t just a name.

And it wasn’t in the book, either.

Bet you don’t have the balls to look up Marbury, do you Jack?

I looked up *Marbury*.

I found it.

Of course I found it.

* * *

Fuck you, Jack.

two

Flash.

* * *

So I threw the book against the wall, and it splattered like a crushed wasp and fell, fluttering dying paper wings onto the heap of the other dead things cluttered on the floor.

And when it slammed against the wall, I noticed the writing there.

At the top, near the ceiling:

373

The number had been written four times at different places on the wall.

373

Maybe the person writing it wanted to be sure someone would see it.

Maybe he knew I was coming.

373

Painted with two fingers; I could see how they pressed together, tracking the strokes of the numbers, smearing the curves and lines—a first and middle finger—dip and stroke, dip and stroke with something dark, some foul concoction, because Marbury wouldn't easily give up anything pure.

373

Outside, the rain raged.

I moved closer.

My shirt still hung open, unbuttoned. I flattened the left side with my palm and looked down at the number stitched there.

373

Maybe everything had the same number here.

Fuck that.

Inmate.

I tore the shirt off. After I knotted it into a ball, I lifted the broken shower door with the toe of my boot and put the shirt on the floor beneath it. Somehow, water had begun pooling in the carpeting there, and I saw something that looked like a long black slug wriggling through the fibers. I could feel the sides of my mouth turning down in disgust and I pressed the door flat beneath my foot.

Now I was nobody.

Welcome back, Jack.

The lightning moved off into the distance but the rain never slackened at all. The sky shifted to the boiled paleness of the Marbury dusk. When I moved closer to the wall, I could make out what had been left as a message.

And there, just below the highest scrawl of the number—my number—my eyes fell upon a drawing of circles inside other circles.

At the midpoint of them all, the word **HOME**.

The center of the universe.

An arrow from the exact middle. It crossed the shape's perimeter, pierced the concentric interior of a second, larger circle.

In this one, **MARBURY**.

I am going to build something big for you.

From there, an arrow shoots into a third.

Trapped inside that circle are the words:

I DON'T KNOW THE NAME OF THIS ONE.

I SAW THE PREACHER THERE.

IT'S ALL MARBURY, BUT IT'S ALL DIFFERENT.

THIS WAS THE HARDEST TO GET OUT OF.

And then, the smears of letters that said:

YOU AND SETH HAVE THE KEYS.

The hardest to get out of.

A third arrow, another world.

The circle encloses the first three.

The final circle, an outer ring that surrounds them all.

I recognize the hand. Of course I recognize the hand.

***I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY MORE THERE ARE. IT IS PROBABLY
UNCOUNTABLE.***

And near the edge of the wall, just at the level of my own heart, floating out there, somewhere—who knows—in Jack’s universe, in deliberate and dark lines, I trace my own fingers around the stroke that had been left behind.

Maybe it’s blood, I thought, the tip of my finger following around a precise drawing of a hammer.

* * *

I know.

It is in Conner’s hand.

* * *

Henry Hewitt had come to Marbury before I did. It was Henry who’d pawned the glasses off on me when I was alone in London. I couldn’t count the number of times I considered getting even with Henry for trapping me, and now I’d done the same thing to my best friends.

It was clear we had all somehow fallen apart, fallen together.

Conner had gotten there before me.

Faintly, somehow, I began to remember. An argument about something, about the next step—Conner yelling at me about how I fucked it up, saying, *Henry said you would bring things here. I didn’t mean the lens. We weren’t supposed to bring the lens here. We fucked up, Jack. We fucked up.* And first Conner, then Ben and Griffin, disappearing in the garage; falling, all of us.

That’s why he drew that mark.

Conner got here first.

And one second might be a month through the Marbury lens.

Maybe forever.

I knew that.

We all did.

At the far edge of the wall, opposite Conner’s drawing of my universe—our universe—I saw more writing:

MIND THE GAP.

FENT IS LOOKING FOR YOU.

THE BUGS ARE EVERYWHERE.

STAY OUT OF THE RAINWATER.

And, finally:

JACK—I WILL FIND YOU AGAIN I PROMISE.

WE WILL PUT THINGS BACK.

CONNER KIRK

I couldn't stay there. There were dead people in the room. And the rain poured down endlessly.

There was an inch of standing water on the floor. I kept wondering about the warning to stay out of the rain, and who—or what—Fent was.

A hallway led off to the right of the entryway, but it was so dark I couldn't see to the end of it. I stayed out of it as long as I could, but it was dry, so I eventually gave up being scared of what I couldn't see there.

At the end of the hall, there were two doors. One of them opened onto a small bathroom. The toilet was missing; there was a black hole in the tile floor where it had been. A slot window above the bathtub let in a steady sheet of rain, but it ran down the wall and into the drain. Here was where the shower door came from.

The other door led to a bedroom. It was dry, but very dark. The window had been boarded over with the broken slate top from a pool table, and the floor was covered with jumbles of dusty cloth: towels, sheets, clothing, drapes, blankets. I could see where people had been sleeping. There was a wide closet set back into one of the walls, but the doors were missing. When I got closer to it, I could tell it was the spot someone had used as a toilet.

There was nothing else I could do.

I shut myself into the room.

I pulled the knife I'd found out of its sheath and held on to it.

I took off my boots and socks and sat down on the matting to wait out the storm.

When I stretched out, I realized I'd laid my head down on a pair of green surgical scrub pants dotted with blood on one of the legs.

They were mine, from somewhere else.

Fuck you, Jack.

Henry said you would bring things here. He didn't mean the lens. We weren't supposed to bring the lens here.

And in the dark, I took the injured lens from my pocket and held it between my fingers.

Nothing.

Only rain.

I even pressed the lens up to my eyes; one, then the other, pleading with it.

The words from the dictionary swirled, a dizzying cloud in my head.

Marbury: (noun) Third planet in order from the sun. No natural satellites. This planet, as the only in the Solar System which is inhabited by humans.

Fuck this place.

Just before morning, the Hunters came.

I couldn't sleep. I lay on my side, curled on top of the blankets, so hungry and thirsty it felt as if I were dissolving, caving in on myself. The rain did not slacken at all; it became this constant white noise, like flying on an airplane that was never going to land.

I got up and walked the hallway, irrationally hoping that maybe it wouldn't be raining anymore once I got back to the front door. And I thought, *It's only rain; it's not like you haven't been in rain before; you need to get the fuck out of here, Jack.*

Everything smelled like warm metal. The air was so thick it felt like I was breathing in fibrous stuffing from torn seat cushions, just the way I'd remembered that unsatisfying Marbury air.

It's all Marbury, but it's all different.

I decided I was going to leave. I had to find some food, something better than this place, and I believed Conner was nearby, and that when we found each other, we'd be able to somehow fix things and put everything back where it belonged. Being around Conner always seemed to make things somehow *right*. I knew we'd messed things up here in Marbury. Maybe back home, too.

Maybe everywhere.

In the blank, pale light before the dawn, I saw them in front of the house. I looked out through the jagged slot window on the door, and there were two of them, wading in knee-deep black water. It was like a sea, and what was left standing of the other houses looked like moored ships, crewless and dead.

I saw the marks first—fiery sashes. On one of them, it stretched across his waist and curled around his thigh. The second Hunter was marked by only a small upturned arc below his left collarbone, a real smile. I ducked back, peering through the slot with one eye, watching them as they strained their way through the water. They stopped every few steps, smelling, looking around.

Maybe they knew I was here.

The bigger of the two, the one with the mark that cut downward to his thigh, carried a steel jacking handle. At one end, in the usual style, was a sharpened human femur that had been lashed, somehow, to the bar. And they were both old, mature, covered in spikes and purple splotches. The smaller one had horns growing out of his nipples, curving upward, and he kept licking at them, nipping, showing his black teeth.

He carried what looked like the head of a three-tined garden cultivator, and was completely naked. Maybe the scalp loincloth fashion I'd seen previously in Marbury hadn't caught on here. Or maybe he was hunting for his first kill. The larger one had a pair of dried and purple human hands, fingers twisted together, overlapped and woven, cupped around his balls, braided onto a belt made from Christmas tree light cord that had been strung on either side of his crotch through the dangling headless torsos of Barbie dolls.

It was Marbury, but it was different, too.

It was Marbury magnified, intensified.

We didn't mean for this to happen.

The Hunters sniffed the air, widening their nostrils. They moved steadily through the dark sea that covered this new world.

But the sheets of rain fell so constantly I was certain they couldn't possibly see me, as I watched them through the jagged mouth of the door's shattered window. And still, they kept coming toward the

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