

prologue

The cast-iron railing wobbled in his hand as he climbed the porch steps. He nearly fell over. After three tries, he decided the doorbell didn't work. The screen door wouldn't give, so he stripped off a glove and rapped on the aluminum frame. Paint the color of pea soup was peeling off the face of the inside door.

A cold drop of rain leaked through the awning over his head and splatted on the back of his neck. He put a hand to his neck and looked up as another drop splashed on his cheek. "Shit," he said, taking a step back and pulling his camouflage jacket tight around the package tucked within.

He looked down the street. Not a person in sight. Two Fords, a Chrysler, and his Chevy pickup truck waited at the curb. A single porch light flickered wanly in the dusk. Two doors down, charring from a fire blackened one side of the house, and wind ruffled the drapes where a windowpane had once been. He looked down. Brown stains pocked the concrete porch, down the three steps, and along the walk to the street. The stains seemed to grow bigger as they neared the curb. He hoped they weren't blood.

He rapped again. Dammit, he thought, I knew I should have just sent it the usual way. Four hours down to this shithole city and now I gotta wait around? How the hell does the guy work in this dump? There's a darkroom in there? He looked at his watch. If he could get this done in the next hour he would still have time to visit one of the Windsor clubs before heading home.

He heard something moving inside, then footsteps on the other side of the door. He swallowed hard and took another step back. Just a delivery, he thought. Just leave the thing and go.

2 Bryan Gruley

The door eased open a crack. He smelled cabbage and cigarettes. A woman's pale round face appeared above the hand holding the door. She seemed to be wearing nothing but a flannel shirt that drooped to her knees.

"What?" she said.

"Riddle. Got something for Charley."

He slipped the manila envelope out from under his coat.

"Riddle? You a joker?"

She had an accent he didn't recognize. Jesus Christ, he thought, is she going to understand a word I say?

"It's my name. Is Charley here?"

The envelope was wrapped in tape and rubber bands. She looked at it with contempt.

"No Charley. We don't want no delivery."

"This is the address he gave me." He glanced at the address plate nailed to the brick. "Cecil Avenue, right?"

A man's voice called out from inside. "Magda!"

She yelled at him in her language. He barked something else, sounding closer now, and she stormed away, leaving the inside door ajar.

The man swung the door open wide. He stood barefoot in a pair of paint-stained sweatpants and a gray T-shirt that said Property of Detroit Lions. A single brow overhung his dark, sunken eyes. He held the door with one hand and kept the other behind his back.

"What you want?"

"I was supposed to bring this for Charley."

"Charley?" The man almost smiled, then decided against it. "Jarek."

"Jarek?" Riddle chuckled nervously. "Jarek, Charley. Got it. Can I leave this for him?"

The man shifted his weight from his left foot to his right, keeping his one hand hidden. Riddle tried not to look at it.

"You are from up north?" the man said.

"Yes, sir. About four hours."

The man stared at Riddle for a moment. "Why do you wear army jacket?" he said. "Are you in military?"

Riddle glanced self-consciously at his camouflage jacket. "Oh, no sir. This is for hunting. Deer, rabbits, you know."

"Aha. You are a killer then. Did you bring gun?"

"My gun? Oh, no sir. That's locked up at home, yes sir."

The man tilted his head slightly. "Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you, but no, I really have to be going. Got a long haul back. Got other deliveries to make, you know. Sorry."

"Other deliveries?" The man leaned forward. "What other deliveries?"

Riddle glanced down the street again. Still not a soul. The last light of afternoon was nearly gone. "Nothing," he said. "I just have to get back."

"Jarek is not here."

"No?"

"No. Not here anymore."

"I see. Well." Riddle tried on what he imagined to be a business-like smile. "Do you know where I can find him?" He wished he hadn't asked the question the second it left his lips.

"Jarek will not be back. You can leave it with me."

The man pushed open the screen door with his hidden hand. The hand held an unlit cigarette. Riddle gave the man the envelope.

"OK, then," Riddle said. "You'll send it back to the usual place?"

The man slammed the door without another word.



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You can never look into their eyes. Not once. Not for a second. Not if you're a goaltender, like me. Because the guy shooting the puck wants you to look there. Then he'll glance one way and shoot the other, or he'll draw your eyes up just as he snaps the puck between your legs. Or he'll lock on you just long enough to remind you that he knows exactly what he's about to do and you don't, that you're just wishing and hoping that you'll guess right. That you're not at all in control.

Then you're dead.

It was nearly midnight. I was tending the hockey goal at the south end of the John D. Blackburn Memorial Ice Arena. And I was yelling for help. Soupy backpedaled across the rink to give me some. It looked like he'd make it just in time to cut off the other team's winger when his skate blade caught a gash in the ice and he went flying. His helmet, an old three-piece Cooper held together by skate laces and friction tape, bounced off of his head and went skittering into the boards.

"Fuck me!" he shouted.

Boynton sidestepped Soupy and the helmet and veered to the center of the ice, heading my way, alone. He was tall and lean, dressed all in black, and he kept his head up as he crossed the blue line, looking for my eyes. I focused on the puck as he slid it back and forth, from the back of his stick to the front. My team was up, 2-1. Less than a minute remained in the game. My left hand, steamy inside my catching glove, whacked once against my belly, involuntarily, and shot out to my side, open and ready. My right arm pressed the bottom edge of my goalie stick against the sandpaper ice. I dropped my squat an inch, dug the inner toe of my right skate into the ice, and glided back

six inches, a foot. I tucked my head into my neck. The thin slick of sweat beneath my mask stung my cheeks. I blinked, hard.

I didn't want to be there. In a drafty hockey rink reeking of refrigerant. Late. In a two-stoplight town clinging to the southeastern tip of a frozen lake in northern lower Michigan. I'd left the place years before, a failure, intending never to return. Now I was back, against my weak will, after failing miserably someplace else. By day, I was the associate editor of the *Pine County Pilot*, circulation 4,733, published every day but Sunday. By night I tended goal in the Midnight Hour Men's League, surrounded by men I'd known as boys. In between I waited for something to change my life, to get me out of Starvation Lake again. That's what goalies do. They wait.

When Boynton had closed to fifteen feet, I felt him drop his right shoulder as if to shoot. Just then, the puck bounced on something—a shaving of ice, a sliver of wood—and tottered on an edge. I glimpsed the chipped scarlet paint of a logo on the underside. I dropped to one knee and flung my stick forward, catching just enough of the wobbling puck to flop it back over Boynton's stick blade. It trickled behind him, and Soupy, bareheaded, swooped in and golfed it clear.

Boynton kept coming, though. I was trying to get to my feet when his stick cracked me under the left ear, below the edge of the mask. A shock of pain tore through my jawbone and rippled down my neck. Boynton's knee speared my chest and I toppled over backward, my head bouncing on the ice as he fell on me. The smells of snuff and hops and sweat and tape filled my nostrils. I could hear a whistle shrieking, again and again. I opened my eyes. Boynton's face was two inches away, a grin beneath dark eyes. "Lucky fuck," he spat before I blacked out.

My wait was over.

The needle punctured the skin along my jawbone and I dug my fingernails into the soft wood of Leo's workbench as he stitched me. I

had tried to numb the left side of my face with a fistful of snow, but the pinpricks stung anyway. The cut took six stitches to close.

"Thanks, Leo," I said. The air in the big steel shed behind Blackburn Arena was sweet with gasoline. I sipped a beer in a circle of light spread by a bulb hanging from the high ceiling. Leo moved out of the light to toss his stitching needle into a wastebasket. It *pinged* on one of his empty 7-Up bottles.

"Try to be more careful," Leo said, emerging into the light again. "You boys aren't boys anymore."

For something like thirty years, Leo Redpath had maintained the rink's compressors and ice scrapers and Zamboni machine. He performed the odd carpentry and plumbing chores that kept the dressing rooms, snack bar, and restrooms in working order. Mostly he kept to himself, content to tinker in his shed and tend to the Zamboni he affectionately called Ethel. And although Leo was no doctor, his workbench sometimes doubled as an operating table for players who didn't want to bother with the local clinic. Leo had been doing it so long that he barely left scars anymore.

"See the game tonight?" I said.

"I never watch," Leo said.

I smiled at his lie. The stitches tugged at my chin. I could make out his wide, hunched-over shape shuffling around in the shadows surrounding Ethel. "You don't see hockey like that too often in Starvation Lake."

"I'm sure no truer words were ever spoken," he said.

"It's that deceptive speed, eh, 'Trap?'" The voice came from the other end of the shed. Soupy walked in with a beer in one hand and two more dangling from a plastic six-pack holder. "We're even slower than we look."

It was one of his favorite lines, and he laughed at it, by himself.

Leo stepped out from behind Ethel. "Well, if it isn't Sonja Henie," he said. "Was that a triple salchow that landed you on your derriere?"

"Derriere?" Soupy said. "Derri-fucking-aire? Haven't we told you

like eight million times to speak English around here? I think the word you're looking for is 'ass,' my friend. And who the hell is Sonja Henie?"

"Leo didn't watch," I said. Talking hurt.

"True," Leo said. "But I did catch a glimpse while carrying a box of Junior Mints to the snack bar."

I jumped down from the workbench. My teeth rattled when I landed. "Well, then, maybe you noticed whether Soupy punched Boynton's ticket on his way past?"

"Blow me, Trap," Soupy said. He stood a head taller than me, long and lanky in a blue denim overcoat with the words "Starvation Lake Marina" encircling an anchor embroidered over the left breast. Thick blond curls furled out from under his red woolen cap. "Gave you a chance to shine. You ought to thank me."

"I would have but I was unconscious."

I finished my beer, tossed the can at the wastebasket, missed, and motioned for one of Soupy's beers. Leo picked up the empty.

"Ultimate Teddy Boynton assault and battery," Soupy said. "You poke-check him, he runs you over." While I was out cold, as Soupy explained, Boynton threatened to punch a referee, who threw him out of the game. "The bastard probably didn't mean to knock you out. Or who knows, maybe he did." Soupy took a long pull on his beer. "He probably didn't like your editorial."

I had no idea Soupy read editorials. "Probably not." I looked around the shed. Leo had disappeared behind Ethel again. "We have a meeting tomorrow."

"With Teddy boy?" Soupy asked.

"And his lawyer."

"His *asshole* lawyer, Trap."

"Of course."

Soupy touched his beer to the side of his head. "Try to keep your head up this time, huh?"

"Quiet, please." Leo was trying to listen to the police scanner. It

sat on a stack of milk crates, keeping him company on slow nights. We heard some crackling and some beeps, then the voice of the dispatcher, Darlene Esper. She was talking with a deputy on his way to Walleye Lake. A snowmobile had washed up onshore.

“Christ,” I said. It was probably nothing. But every local over the age of fifty had a police scanner next to the bed, on the garage workbench, or on the shelf over the washing machine, and they’d all be talking about that snowmobile on Walleye Lake at Audrey’s Diner the next morning. I grabbed Leo’s rotary phone and dialed the sheriff’s department. One of the perks of being associate editor of the *Pilot* was knowing that number by heart. Darlene answered.

“Deputy Esper,” I said. “Gus Carpenter.” I hoped for a chuckle. Darlene and I had grown up next door to each other. Our mothers had finally given up trying to marry us. So had Darlene.

“Gussy,” she said. “You hear about the sled?”

“Yeah.”

“You better get out there. Sheriff’s out there.”

“Dingus? Why, is there an all-you-can-eat buffet?”

“Just go, Gus.”

I lingered on the phone—her voice always got me that way—but she’d already hung up. I zipped up my parka, fished out my truck keys. “Leo, thanks for the embroidery,” I said. He didn’t answer.

“Can’t keep away from her, can you?” Soupy said.

“Good skate, Soup,” was all I said.

As I stepped into the night, I heard him call out: “Mrs. Darlene Esper—sweetest ta-tas in Starvation Lake.”