

ONE

The river's pulse was sluggish, wearied with winter's run. He laid aside his fishing rod and dropped beside it, equally wearied with too much thought from rambling through his father's house. *Gawd-damnit, Kyle, stop chewin' them fingers*, Sylvanus was always grumbling. He shook off his wool mitt and chewed now at a hangnail that was sending slivers of pain through his thumb. *There's people who cut themselves to escape the pain in their heads*, his friend Kate had said the other night, strumming her guitar beside the bonfire. *That why you chewin' your fingers, Kyle, to escape a pain in your head?*

Gawd-damn. Least it was his fingers he chewed. If Kate was right and his mouth was big enough, he'd have his head gnawed down to a stump. He looked upriver to where his father was likely staggering to catch up. Too many swallows of whisky too late in the day. He was usually drunk and sobered up by now.

His own mouth was dry from drink. He'd broken his own rule back there, drinking before dark. He scooped river water into his mouth, sloshed it around, and then spat it out and sat back. Across the river, massive wooded hills of the northern peninsula sighed

through the fog. A long flagging reach downriver and the water buckled against the northern cliff wall, pooling itself into dead black depths before elbowing out of sight through a thicket of still leafless alders and drowning itself into the sea just beyond.

He glanced upriver again, listening for his father, Sylvanus Now. They'd heard a few hours before from some of the boys angling for trout that Trapp was back for another of his infrequent night visits when he visited nobody and spoke to nobody and then vanished again before sun-up. Trapp. Weird, feral Trapp. Prowling through the darkened places where he'd once lived. Then vanishing with the light of dawn, leaving nothing in his wake but raised brows and the hackles of folks from the Hampden outpost. Trapp. Aptly nicknamed, for he carried the dark, disagreeable, secretive ways of all the Trapps. *Bad blood*, outpost people said of the two Trapp brothers who'd relocated there during the government's resettlement program. And thank God the rest of the Trapp clan had gone forty miles farther down the shore in Jackson's Arm. They—the two Trapp brothers—had kept to themselves on the wooded hillside above Kyle's home. They'd started up a sawmill and bad-mouthed anyone who set foot over their property line. Everyone had applauded the mysterious burning of the screaming sawmill just two years ago and the Trapps' subsequent packing up and moving with no forwarding address. Except for this younger Trapp. The prowler. He was from the Jackson's Arm side of the clan. Never did live in Hampden, simply visited his uncles regularly and buddied around with Ben, the nicest fellow in Hampden, who always let Trapp hang out no matter his sly looks and his creeping and skittering about like something untamed. He'd gone to university with Ben until they both mysteriously dropped out mid-semester and vanished into the oilfields of Alberta.

Trapp. One of the last to see Chris alive. He'd been working the rig alongside Chris when the accident happened. And each time Sylvanus heard that Trapp had been seen squirrelling about he'd lean greedily into the news, into the concreteness of something that linked him to the last minutes of his son's life. Like a lost Christmas package found, mouldy and dank with age. Holding something that might soothe him, bring him peace.

Kyle felt nothing. He remembered a yarn about a monkey's paw that granted an old woman her wish that her son, dead for a number of years, would be returned to her. He was. The stench through the wooden door saturated the house and the old woman fainted, knowing he'd been returned as he was—ten years dead. Skin dried, shredding from husked bone. Nope. Kyle Now was done with wishing. He was settled into the hollowed ache of his brother's death, and if this ache was the closest he could feel to Chris, he'd suffer it through till his own demise. At least it was something. Without it there would be nothing.

His father had said nothing back there with the anglers. Hadn't said Chris's name once in the three years since they buried him. Wouldn't let anyone else say it either. Dropped his fork at the supper table once and bolted out the door when Kyle, naming the bowls as he laid them on the table for dessert, named one for Chris out of habit. If not for the desolate look on his mother's face, Kyle would've run from his words too. Ducked into his room and buried his head so deep into his pillow he would've smothered all thought.

His mother knew that. She had touched his hand to stay him. And then sipped her tea in quiet and he wanted to touch her hand, too, but couldn't. Oh, he wished he could. He wished he could drag his father back to the table and they'd all say a prayer to Chris as his mother wanted. And act as though he was present

in spirit like the good folks and ministers preached. But easier to envision celestial worlds floating through the firmament than Chris sitting in that empty chair at the table. And so Chris remained, foremost amongst them but hidden beneath their shirt collars like a great festering boil begging to be lanced.

A horned owl swooshed out of the trees above Kyle's head with a loud *ho-ho-hoo hoo* and he ducked, cursing the bird. The snapping of sticks sounded behind him and his father broke through the brush, head down, shoulders down, walking heavy. Rowing against a poisonous river of grief for three years now, going nowhere. Time wearing past him. Threading grey through his glut of dark hair and thickening his belly and rutting that once strong face and throat. He caught sight of Kyle and grinned, the corners of his dark eyes tight. He'd been bawling back there.

"Thought you fell in and drowned," said Kyle.

Sylvanus grunted. "That's it now." Laying aside his rod, he dropped his rucksack and sat on it with his back resting against a stump and pulled a flask of whisky from his inside coat pocket.

"Leave off, old man, for fuck's sake," said Kyle. "Mother's going to kill you."

"Think now, I'm scared of your mother?"

"Might help if you were. Another heart attack waiting for you."

Sylvanus tipped the bottle to his mouth, his hand trembling. Hiking his shoulders, Kyle stood. "Not waiting." He started downstream, ignoring his father calling after him, coaxing him to wait, to have a nip. Gawd, he hated that coaxing in his father's voice, the greed in his eyes as he sucked back the liquor. As if it was going to fix the pain gnawing his innards.

Kyle kept to the path, his boots squelching through mud. He ducked through a tunnel of alders whose leafless limbs scratched his face and whipped cold past his ears. A few minutes later and

he broke through onto a fetid muddied bank. The river ran swollen beside it, its surface flat and silent and white beneath its caul of fog. He trod past chip bags and wrappers partly submerged in mud and broken beer bottles and charred fire pits from night parties. He stopped, scuffed some of the glass into the river, picked up a couple of chip bags and stuffed them in his pockets, cursing the irresponsible young ones. He stood up, then leaped back with a yelp from a pale, pointed face sifting through the fog before him. Tawny hair and ruffs of sideburns, reddish like a fox. Fine green eyes, the dazed look of someone lost inside himself, and yet furtive, sharp with tension as though readying to spring.

“Ha ha.” Trapp’s silly, nasal laugh.

“Ha ha your fucking self,” said Kyle. He forced his shocked limbs to move and walked rapidly along the riverbank, coming to a footbridge beyond which his father’s truck was parked, a black smudge through the mist. Three crumbling concrete pillars from an old logging operation rose to the side of it like ancient ruins.

He got in the truck and started it and blasted the heat and pulled the stick into drive—and then pushed it back into park and slumped in his seat, cursing. Cursing at his fright and stirred up feelings from seeing Trapp, and cursing that he couldn’t go home without his father. She’d be there making supper. She’d be watching. She was always watching when they came through the door, noting Sylvanus’s bleary eyes and whisky breath. Kyle hated it. Hated her disappointment each time, her knowing that her husband was no longer finding his comfort in her. And then the bickering.

Three beer, Addie, three beer, I only had three beer.

And the whisky you washed them down with.

Now Addie, now Addie . . .

Don’t now Addie me . . .

The same. Always the same. Least the river kept on flowing, no matter how much crap it carried. Always shifting bedrock and cutting through ice and changing its song. Felt like he'd been circling the same eddy for so long now that he was outside the passing of time. Sometimes he was surprised to look up into a summer's sky and see instead the trees shaking their yellowed leaves or snowflakes falling all too soon and soaking his lashes. Felt like the one long day for three years now. The one long dull day, caught on a cloud of grief hovering over his house.

Water dripped from his hair and trickled cold down his neck. He reached under the seat, found another of his father's whisky bottles, and took a quick nip to warm himself. He watched the fog through the windshield sculpting itself into Trapp's pale pointy face, shifting into the fierce blue of his mother's eyes and then into the dark of his father's, and then widening onto the dark blue hood of the truck. The cursed truck Chris had left home to pay for. That and the boat. The good lord had taken a hand in sinking the boat a week after Chris's passing. Crushed it against the side of the wharf with a ton of drifting ice from the spring thaw.

He wished the ice had crunched up over the road and crushed the truck, too. Rammed it against the cliffs and crunched it down to a heap of metal. Kept him from driving it through the outport like a hearse the first couple of years after Chris's accident, his father drunk and slumped against him, whimpering like a cut dog. Circling the outport so many times old men in their windows started keeping count. Thirteen times one Saturday. Seventeen times another. Each circle ending with Kyle parking near the graveyard down on the Rooms and looking past the crumbling granite headstones to the newest one lodged over the hole where Chris lay. *Christopher Now. 1957–1980. Taken Too Soon.* He'd stare for hours at that headstone, his father whimpering and suckling

the whisky bottle beside him. Stared till his eyes turned to stone and his tears dried up like an old riverbed.

Shame, drinking over his passing and getting maudlin with your own sorry self.

Drinking! Now Addie . . .

And having Kyle driving you around like that, not fit.

Now Addie . . .

Don't now Addie me, drinking before you leaves the doorplace in the mornings.

Three beers, I haves three beers . . .

And the whisky you washes them down with . . .

Don't talk, don't talk, for fuck's sake don't talk, he'd plead silently with his father each time he drove him home drunk before noon and she'd be standing there, waiting. But Sylvanus had the staying power of a sapling beneath an easterly wind when she took a swipe at him. Not that he'd ever learned from it. No, by jeezes, he'd never learn to keep his mouth shut, as though he could argue himself out of shame.

One beer, Addie, I had one beer.

Too drunk to see past your boots.

I can see far enough to the Rooms. That's as far as I'm going—the graveyard on the Rooms.

Drinking yourself dead.

Now, Addie, the pope serves more in church than what I drinks.

You knows a lot about the pope, you do.

If what they're preaching on TV is right, we'd all be better off not going. Sickos.

That what you says to the reverend when he's burying our dead?

Now Addie . . .

You dare hide your drinking behind him.

I wants him back, Addie, I wants him back . . .

Times Kyle sank into the couch with his hands over his ears, shutting them out. His older sister, Sylvie, sitting across from him in Gran's old rocker by the stove, her face hidden inside a book. Those first years neither Kyle nor his sister left the house for long. There were fist holes in the walls reminding them of those times. A smattering of them led down the hallway and one was smack in the middle of their parents' bedroom door. Not that their father would ever lay a hand on his Addie. But times her tongue would lacerate his drunken mind to the point where he'd hit a wall just to feel the smack of his fist splintering wood. Kyle understood that. No different from him chewing his fingers. Except Kyle's was a peaceful brooding. He'd done nothing to aid Chris's leaving for the oil rigs in Alberta with Sylvie that morning. But his father had been sick—heart attack from working himself to death fishing for cod that were too scarce to pay the bills and so he doubled his workload with cutting and hauling logs for the sawmills too. Heart just up and called it quits. New boat and new truck parked out by the door like hungry dogs, growling for their bank payments. And Sylvie. Good good Sylvie stepping up to the fates. Came flying from her high-paying job in the oil-soaked fields of Alberta like Persephone, wife of Hades, Lord of Underground Wealth. Took Chris back with her to the oil fields to help wrestle those snarling dogs and six weeks later Chris was dead. Poor sister. And now she was gone. Off backpacking in Africa somewhere, bewildered by how it all turned out, that her feet continue to walk above the sod whilst Chris's reside in the shadowed depths of the underworld.

At times Kyle cursed Sylvie and Chris both. For leaving him torn between two grieving parents whose desired end could never be found in him. For his feeling lame because there wasn't enough of him to fill their hearts. Times he wished for a sword to cleave himself in half: one traipsing behind his father, keeping him from

the loneliness of his pain, the other shadowing his mother, helping her cleanse her house of grief.

He stirred in his seat, a sliver of pain darting through the quick of his thumbnail. He'd been chewing his nails again. He reamed his hand into his pocket. Foul! There was something foul about Trapp showing up all the time and never talking to anyone. There was something foul about the whole thing. Sylvie coming home alone with the body. Then Ben coming with Trapp in tow. All three had been tight when they worked the rig. All three had taken a hand in looking out for Chris when he joined them. And yet only Sylvie came home on that flight bearing Chris's coffin. Sylvie and their mother. Addie. Flying the skies for the first time to help Sylvie bring Chris home. Else Sylvie would still be out there, cowering in the closet where Addie found her. Too distraught to stand. And Ben off searching for Trapp who'd run from the accident and couldn't be found. They returned three months later, Trapp and Ben. Shame-cast eyes. All three of them—Sylvie, Ben, and Trapp—with shame-cast eyes and a broodiness accompanying their grief. He'd never understood that. Never understood what stalked their sleep at night and eventually sent Ben and Sylvie prowling through savannahs and jungles, leaving Trapp behind to roam in darkness.

His father's dark shape sifted through the thinning fog. Kyle sat up and started the motor, stomping down on the gas pedal to quiet its revving. Sylvanus kicked the muck of his boots against the truck tire and near fell over.

"Cripes, Mother's going to shoot you," said Kyle as his father climbed aboard. "You all right?"

Sylvanus darted a crooked finger towards the windshield. "Drive."

"Smell the booze a mile away."

“That’s it now.”

“*That’s it now.* Right.” Kyle eased the truck over a rough track of tire-flattened beach rocks and turned right from where the river fanned out over the beach before flowing into its shallow mud flat at the mouth of the bay. He drove them across a gravel flat that served as a soccer field during the dustier days of summer. A nice clapboard cabin stood on the inner side of the flat, its back pushing against the encroaching alder bed. Kate’s place. Her door was closed, white smoke clouding from her chimney. Wood must be green. Perhaps he should check whether she had enough wood splits to keep her fire hot.

At the end of the gravel flat he turned left onto Wharf Road, a rutted thoroughfare leading between the rocky edge of the sea and the steep hillside to its right. A few hundred yards down and the road T-boned onto a long sagging wharf. To the right was their one-storey house with its front step resting on the wharf and heavily treed hills rising straight up behind it. He parked in front of the weathered woodshed and jarred his father awake with a punch to the shoulder.

“Mother’s going to kill you. Get in the shed till you sobers up.” He got out of the truck and Sylvanus kept sitting there. “Go on, get out. Get in the shed. I’ll tell her you’re fixing your rod.”

“Come with me.”

“Fucking go by yourself.” *Jaysus!*

He went into the porch and hung up his coat and kicked off his boots, his damp wool socks smelling like overcooked mutton. The inside door was ajar and he stepped in through to the front room. She wasn’t moving around the kitchen fixing supper as she usually was at this time, but sitting quiet in Gran’s rocker. She was leaning towards the woodstove, her head bowed before its hot orange flames licking at the glass door. Thinking about Gran, he

figured, and stepped softly towards her. He often sat there himself, thinking about Gran who'd drifted from them as quiet as a puff of smoke up the chimney a year following Chris's passing. It was nice, after the horror of Chris's stark white face, to see Gran's all sweet and peaceful on a lacy pillow.

"How's she going, Mom?"

Addie startled onto her feet like a snuck-upon lynx and scampered into the kitchen.

"Where's your father?" she asked, hauling down the plates for supper.

"The shed. Fixing his rod. What's wrong?"

"Supper's soon ready." She took down the cups, chinking them in their saucers, her back to him.

"Mom?"

She stopped and looked at him and his heart jolted. Her eyes, always frightfully blue, were darkened and wide with—with what?

She raised a hand to touch him and he stepped back, then bolted to the washroom. He skimmed off his clothes and stepped into the shower, turning on the faucet and holding up his face to a spray of hot water. The last time he'd seen her face shrouded with such sorrow was when she stepped off the plane from helping Sylvie bring Chris home. From straight across the tarmac as he stood inside the airport watching her through the thick panes of glass he had seen her sorrow. Seen it in the way she kept her chin erect. In the way her eyes had determinedly sought his through the crowd gathering around and watching alongside of him. And he'd been surprised by such sorrow, for he'd expected to see in her eyes the keener suffering of grief instead. Three babies buried from the womb: she knew grief. Knew its dark and twisted path all fraught with madness and hate and fear and its narrowed arteries choking with self-blame. And perhaps she

hadn't the strength to walk through it again. Or, as he'd seen when she reached back through the doorway of the plane that day and helped Sylvie's shocked-bent body through the narrow cylinder, perhaps her knowing disallowed another indulgent walk. Perhaps she'd learned how hope eventually creeps through darkness, making inroads through to an easier tomorrow. And that was her task then, to bear her grief with a hope that might shelter him and Sylvie through the coming days. And she had. Cradled and carried them as much as they would allow her. Oftentimes this past year, despite Sylvanus's drinking, hope continued to grow in her eyes and he'd been turning to it more and more, hoping to offset the grey clouding his.

Water sluiced down his back, scrubbing the day's dirt off his skin. It caressed the smooth humps of his buttocks and streamed down the backs of his legs and plashed around his feet before suckling itself down the drain. He kept his face to the jettisoning spray of the nozzle and felt its heat flush open his pores and he flattened his hands against the shower stall as though keeping his insides from being flushed out and sucked down the drain along with the water. He had bolted from her that day at the airport, too. Bolted out onto the highway and thumbed a ride with a trucker who left him sitting in silence, staring out the side window. At Hampden Junction he climbed out of the truck with a grateful nod and started running the ten miles home, jumping into the ditch and cowering whenever he heard a car coming because he didn't want anyone seeing him, didn't want to talk, didn't know what to say or do since that one ring of the phone had altered his being and it felt like somebody else was running in his shoes. When he got home, the house was swarming with aunts and uncles and cousins and friends who'd been coming and going since the news swept through the outport like a squall of wind.

Young Chris was killed. Killed on the oil rigs in Alberta. An accident, a bad accident.

Cut through him, too. Had loosened his bowels and sunk a hole in his stomach that all else sank into. He would've liked to cry. But the good folk kept shouldering him, kept finding him as he tried to hide. Kept bringing him back amongst them, rubbing his back and laughing and nudging him to laugh when they did. He did. Shame creeping up his face once, when he laughed too hard and imagined his mother and father hearing him from their torn pillows. And perhaps dear old Gran had heard him too as she lay in her room with her own host of women keeping vigil and wiping her teary eyes with tissues pulled from their too full bosoms.

He wished they could have soothed him. He wished they could have filled that hole cratering his stomach and helped him straighten his legs from their cramped fetus curl and make him feel whole again. He had gnawed his nails and held back his cries till his throat ached and his fingers bled and Chris was buried and they'd all left and then he cried. He cried all the time. Crawled behind the woodpile and cried. Crawled beneath Chris's old workshirt in the woodshed and cried. Cried walking home from the bar in Hampden and from the beach fires at night, leaning into the space where Chris had always walked beside him, grunting like a bear sometimes to scare him.

His mother kept looking to him, willing him to share his grief with her, to let her share hers with him, but he couldn't. Frightened that the weight of her pain would fuse with his own, toppling him. He couldn't bear being with Sylvie, either. Couldn't bear it. Afraid of the shame or guilt or grief that was robbing her eyes of light. Afraid she might talk, might tell him what really happened that day on the rigs and what she had or hadn't done that might've prevented it, and he wanted nothing of it. It was an accident.

An accident—cold, clean words that evoked no image. They evoked no thoughts, no questions that might send him raging towards her or someone else with the finger of blame and hate and condemnation. Please God. Tell me no more.

She'd tried to tell him one drunken night outside the bar. Tried holding on to him, her wet face pressed against his, and he'd pushed her away and ran and was still running. Running from everything.

He shut off the faucet and took as long as he could to dry himself and put on clean clothes. He wanted to slink into his room and bar the door, but she'd heard him.

“Go call your father, Kyle.” She was hovering over the table, holding a cast-iron frying pan, her wrist bending beneath its weight as she scooped fried potatoes onto their plates alongside pork chops and onions. He opened the door and roared out to his father and took his seat back at the table. She lay the frying pan back on the stove and came up behind him, scruffing the back of his head with her fingers, the cool tips of her nails grazing his scalp.

Jaysus! He ducked away. “Still groping for head lice,” he said, feeling sheepish as he always did when she showed him affection.

She went back to the sink and he listened to her kitchen sounds. It was his favourite thing when Chris had first left for Alberta, sitting at the table and munching toast and reading a comic and half-listening as she swept and tidied, passing along bits of gossip. It was always Chris she'd talked to before. It was Chris his father had talked to. And then, with Chris flying off with Sylvie, they both started sitting with him and chatting him up and cripes it was nice and he was often feeling like the sun between a pair of sundogs.

Then the call. The chatting stopped. And he became one of those things she helped tidy before putting away.

She came back to the table and sat light as a pigeon, her dark hair pinned back, face small like a girl's. Pale. She looked at him and smiled reassuringly and his fear deepened.

"What did you say your father was doing?"

"Fixing his rod."

"Get any trout?"

"Water's too high."

"All that rain. Sure, you knew that before you left."

"He likes going."

"Wish he was still the warden. Only thing he liked more than fishing cod was guarding that river." Her hands were steadied as she sugared her tea and poured in a drop of milk.

"Might get the salmon back yet," he said. "Open the river agin. Get his job back."

"I hope he finds something soon. Keep his mind occupied." She lapsed into silence and his stomach rolled. "Eat your supper," she said.

He picked up his fork.

"Did you hear about Clar Gillard?" she asked. "Tied Bonnie to a chair at the fish plant and sprayed her with oven cleaner."

"What!"

"That's what he did, then. The cook hove a pan of cold water over her soon as he started, but she still got burns on her skin."

"Didn't she leave him months ago?"

"Still treats her like he owns her. Barbarous devil. I'm after telling her a couple of times now to phone the police on him. I phoned her agin awhile ago. Told her if she didn't, I was going to."

Kyle was looking at his mother in surprise. "Since when did you start talking to Bonnie Gillard?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"That's just it now, you never talks to nobody any time, and now you're *phoning* Bonnie Gillard?"

“Perhaps it’s time I got out more.”

“And you picks Bonnie Gillard to hang with? Next thing Clar’ll be coming after you.”

“Let him come.”

“Right. Just what we needs. Crazy like his father, everybody quivering like rabbits around him.”

“He’ll not find me quivering like a rabbit, then.”

“I seen rabbits bite. I seen him skinning rabbits, too. Size of his hands, he’d snap her like a wishbone. Seen him carry a dead moose through the woods once—antlers and all. Slung across his shoulders like it was a dog’s carcass. Why don’t she just move away?”

“She’s been living with her sister down Hampden the past month.”

“I mean Toronto, someplace.”

“I’m sure he knows his way to Toronto.”

“How come she don’t call the cops herself?”

“Because he punishes her all the harder, after. My, Kyle, you think she haven’t thought of them things? You’re like everybody else—believing the woman haven’t got a brain because she’s Jack Verge’s daughter.”

“How come she keeps going back with him, then? Don’t make much sense to me.”

“You knows what makes sense to her? You walks in her shoes? All you know is talk.”

“Nothing wrong with talk. Might keep her from going back this time, everybody talking.”

“Suppose they gets it wrong—do talk help then? Might help if everybody cleaned out their own closets.”

“Jaysus, Mother, he’s been knocking her around for years.”

“I’m not talking about Bonnie or Clar, I’m talking about you.”

“Me!”

“Yes, you. Got lots to say about things not your concern. You needs to be like everybody else, tending to your own concerns.” The sharpness of her eyes as she stared at him, her consternation, as though she were seeing something on his face known only to her. He fought not to look away.

She went back to picking at her food, but he could tell her thoughts were still on him.

She looked up as the front door opened. Sylvanus entered quieter than a draft of wind and took his seat at the table. He fixed his eyes on his plate and guardedly lifted his fork.

“Get your rod fixed?” asked Addie.

His brows shot upwards. “Who broke my rod?”

Jaysus. Kyle gave him a warning look but Addie appeared too taken by her thoughts to notice. She buttered a slice of bread and laid it by Sylvanus’s plate, and as if she didn’t know what else to do with her hands, she rested them on the table, small and pale as clam shells.

Kyle stared into the rusted brown of his cup of tea. Spoons chinked against china. Forks clicked. A hiccup from Sylvanus. Kyle coughed to cover it and asked his mother to pass the bread.

“Perhaps you should call the police,” said Kyle. “Sounds like he’s on the warpath agin.”

“Who?” asked Sylvanus.

“Clar Gillard.”

“I almost called them yesterday, then,” said Addie. “He was throwing sticks into the cemetery and then getting his dog trampling over the graves to fetch it. Chris’s grave.”

Kyle’s hand froze midway to spearing a bit of spud. He tried to speak but couldn’t. He looked at his father whose face stiffened like a mask, his eyes hard as rocks. He looked at his mother—that’s why she was off. Watching Chris’s grave being desecrated. That bastard. That pretty smiling face bastard Gillard.

“If I thought I was dying, I’d take him with me,” said Addie, her voice filled with such loathing that Kyle forgot his own rage and both he and his father looked at her. She picked up her fork, forcing a smile. “He drove off fast enough when I stood up. Eat your supper, Syllie. There’s other things to talk about. I was talking to Elsie on the phone this morning.”

Jaysus. Kyle sat back. As if there wasn’t enough on the table.

“She said Jake and her boys quit building their house with Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and that the two of ye were taking over the building of it.”

“We were waiting to tell you after supper,” said Kyle. “Yeah. They couldn’t handle it. So, we thought we’d take it on.”

“*We*. What do you know about building a house, Kyle?”

“Helped Dad build Uncle Manny’s house in Jackson’s Arm last summer.”

“And that makes you a carpenter?”

“I liked it. That’s how you find out what you like, by doing it. Imagine, if Uncle Manny never moved back from Toronto, I might be signing on for philosophy like Sis. That got her the big job, didn’t it?” He tried to soften the edge in his tone but she caught it and rapped his knuckles.

“You worry about yourself. Else, straightening used nails with a rock is all you’ll be good for.”

He grinned, knowing she’d like that—him taking a trade at the nearby vocational school in Corner Brook the coming fall instead of driving across the island to university in St. John’s. There was a time when she would have balked at his mentioning trades. Her girlhood prayer was to be educated and live in cities and become a missionary and travel to foreign places and she was forever resentful of being taken out of school when she was just starting grade nine to work the fish flakes. But now—since Chris,

and since Sylvie flew to Africa weeks ago—she'd had the shine rubbed off her prayer beads.

“Whatever you choose, you'll have to start making plans soon enough,” she said. “What's wrong with you, Syllie? You haven't said a word.”

“He got his mind bogged down with blueprints,” said Kyle. “Hey!” He touched his mother's hand with his fork. “Somebody got to take it over. They near froze last winter in that shack.”

“They'll always live in shacks. They don't take care of nothing.”

“They never had nothing to keep clean before, did they?”

“Their father had as good as we, he just let it all rot down around him. You must be addled, Syllie, to work with Jake agin. He didn't mind leaving you in the lurch back in Cooney Arm when all the fish was gone.”

“He was just chasing the fish, Addie.” Sylvanus had laid down his fork and was staring at his food. “Why'd he do that?”

“Who, Clar? Because he heard I was urging Bonnie to call the police on him, that's why. Thought he'd have a little fun with me. Get past that now, Syllie, that's all he'll ever get out of me. Tell me about Jake—”

“Why? What's going on you wants to call the police?”

“They had another fight. What about Jake's boys? They're home, why can't they finish building the house? Didn't that younger one do carpentry in trades school?”

“Wade,” said Kyle. “And Uncle Jake's going to be working on a fishing boat for the summer. Wade needs help.”

“They needs help cleaning up the mess they've already made.”

“We needs five thousand up front to buy the supplies,” said Kyle. “Perhaps not that much. I think they got the footing laid for the basement. We'll see when we goes down—we haven't been down there yet.”

“You took it on without even seeing it? Well, sir. And suppose now I needs that money?”

She didn’t speak further. Kyle laid down his fork. It was coming. She lifted her chin in that defiant manner of hers and he was struck once more by her fortitude. That whatever this new thing thickening her cloud of sorrow, hope was already ignited in her heart and offering itself as a shelter for him and his father.

“I have to go to Corner Brook tomorrow. See the doctor. I— There’s a little lump in my breast. They did some tests already.”

Sylvanus blanched. Kyle closed his eyes, cringing as his mother spoke the word, that dirty little word, that ugly little word, cancer. Breast cancer. He’d known three women with breast cancer and they were all dead. He was on his feet and heading for the door and outside before his mother could reach him. He bolted up the road and started running through the night made darker by the damp shroud of fog, his feet picking his path from memory. To his right he could make out the dark ridge of shoreline and hear the water sloshing around rocks like some ancient demon slithering in and out of sight beside him. He took the turnoff onto the gravel flat and kept running, closer to the alder bed and away from the orange dome of Kate’s bonfire down by the water. He heard the strains of her guitar, her voice trilling through the fog like a distant psalm guiding his feet through the dark. He came to the river and found the footbridge and crossed it and veered upriver over wet mounds of dead grass that slipped eel-like around his ankles. No longer did it feel as though someone else ran in his shoes. For three years now he’d been mapping this artery of grief. He kept winding his way upriver. When he could no longer hear Kate, when his ears filled with the river water rustling through the grass and slapping against the rocks, he lowered himself to his knees and opened his mouth and his voice rose from his belly and carried over the water like the cry of a loon.