

THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

COLORADO

1982

On what should have been the next to last night of their vacation, Hank Abbott drove out of the mountains in a silence broken only by the sound of gravel ricocheting off the undercarriage of the station wagon and the occasional snores and bursts of rustling from his sleeping family. Lori sat slumped in the passenger's seat with her cheek flattened against the window, her lips parted, her breath frosting the glass. George and Davy lay tangled beneath a down comforter in the back seat, Davy with his head tucked into his older brother's armpit and George with one hand pressed against the side of his own face like the eye-punched victim of a schoolyard brawl. From his place up front, Hank couldn't see into the footwell beside the boys, but he knew what lay curled there: Manny, their four-year-old beagle, probably wedged between a pair of dirty sneakers or flopped across a bag of cooking utensils, no doubt looking even less comfortable than the rest of them.

The smell coming from behind the wagon's back seat was thick and unmistakable: piss, urine—what Hank and Lori had long referred to, at least in the presence of their children, as potty little.

Another in a lengthy series of switchbacks appeared in the road ahead. Hank slowed the car. These mountain roads were devilishly dark and curvier than a Parkinson's patient's question

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mark, but so far Hank had surprised himself by navigating them with the accuracy and sure-handedness of an action movie stunt driver. The headlights swept over a thick copse of evergreens and returned to the macadam. Hank steered into a long straightaway and took the chance to peek down at the clock on the dash. 11:58. Nearly midnight.

Three hours earlier, in the not-yet-soiled tent, Hank had buried himself in his sleeping bag and fallen asleep to the sounds of cool mountain breezes blowing through the pine boughs overhead. Now, driving his family back toward civilization in the vehicular equivalent of a construction site porta-potty, he marveled at how quickly things could go downhill.

It was the end of July and should have been hot even in the middle of the night—back home, it certainly would have been—but the mountains had a climate all their own. Hank shivered and turned up the wagon's heater.

He sneaked a glance into the rearview. Davy, their youngest, would turn seven next month. In the mirror's reflection, however, Davy looked more like a napping toddler than a soon-to-be first-grader. The boy shifted position and wrapped a twiggish arm around his brother's chest.

Hank didn't blame Davy for what had happened back at camp. How could he? An accident was an accident, and blaming Davy, whose poor little face had gone brick red when the flashlight lit up the tent and they all saw what he'd done, would have been more than unfair—it would have been cruel. Hank liked to think he was neither.

Still, he didn't guess he was wrong to be a little peeved at the sudden and unplanned end to the vacation. Especially if he directed his disappointment at the gods of fate rather than at the little boy in the back seat wearing his second pair of jammies for the night.

The original plan had been to leave the campsite the following morning, when they would have had plenty of time to get things put away and packed into the station wagon properly. After the accident, however, Hank had seen no other option than

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to shove their gear into the car and head for the nearest hotel. Their sleeping bags were soaked (where that much urine had come from, Hank still wasn't sure; kid's bladder had to be the size of a watermelon) and none of them could stomach the smell inside the tent. They cleaned things the best they could with the supplies they had, but not well enough, and Hank was looking forward to a hotel laundry room and plenty of soap.

The campground was now forty-five minutes and fifteen miles behind them. Hank had at least another hour of driving ahead—he'd noticed two or three hotels back in town a week earlier, before they'd ventured onto these less-traveled roads, which was to say before they'd left the real world behind—they'd surely find a vacancy in at least one of them. He knew he could stay awake for two or three more hours, but he sure as hell didn't *want* to.

He slowed for another switchback, dropping the station wagon's speed to just under ten miles per hour. The headlights lit the roadside trees again. Hank had never noticed the lights being especially bright, but out here, miles from any other source of illumination, beneath a starless, moonless sky of thick clouds, even the low beams seemed like twin supernovas.

Hank rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and yawned.

From the passenger's seat, Lori murmured. Hank looked over to make sure she was all right and found her still fast asleep. After the night they'd had, Lori could use the rest, and Hank wouldn't wake her, but he definitely would have liked the company. He sighed and turned back to the road.

And that was when it happened.

The ragged pavement ahead of the station wagon disappeared behind a dark-brown blur. At first, Hank thought he'd steered them off the road and right at the trunk of one enormous mother of a tree. It took only a second for him to glimpse the single brown eye and the four hooved legs, only the beat of a heart to realize that no tree in the history of trees had ever grown itself a pair of antlers, what George and Davy still called

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antennas. That moment of realization, it turned out, was one of Hank Abbott's last. The moose turned its shaggy brown head toward the oncoming disaster, and Hank jammed his foot against the station wagon's brake pedal.

The reaction didn't come soon enough, and the explosive sounds of impact—the breaking, screaming, screeching, crunching sounds of impact—broke the night's silence for good.

Davy knew he'd made a mistake. Sometimes, back home, he woke up at night and found he'd pottied little in his bed. It was a disgusting feeling, like when you put your jammies on after your bath before you dried all the way off, only warmer and stinkier. Going potty in his bed was the absolute worst thing he could think of, but he hadn't done it in such a long, long time (at least three or four weeks) that he'd thought maybe he'd never do it again.

Wrong. This time he'd done it right in the tent and gotten everybody wet and made them pack up all their things and leave the vacation early.

Stupid. He knew it was a gross thing to do, a real stupid little baby thing to do, but he didn't know how to stop it. He'd never pottied his pants while he was awake. At least, not since he could remember. Maybe when he'd been younger (*way* younger), but not in a long time, and that had to be worth something. It wasn't like he did it on *purpose*. Still, he knew his parents must be mad. They hadn't screamed at him or made mean faces, but Davy knew they must be awfully mad.

Davy had spent the entire cleanup process and most of the drive wondering what his mom and dad might do. Make him wear diapers to bed? Buy him plastic sheets? Spank him? No, probably not that last one, they'd never spanked before, but surely they wouldn't just let the mistake go unpunished.

Georgie, Mommy, and Manny had all gone to sleep almost immediately after leaving camp, but Davy only pretended. He

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couldn't sleep. The engine was too loud, the back seat too uncomfortable, and his tummy and legs still a little too icky feeling.

Mommy had wiped him off and gotten him a pair of clean jammies, but he could still feel the potty. Sticky. Stinky. Gross.

So he pretended to sleep and *tried* to pretend none of it had really happened. Davy had always been good at pretending.

He lay thinking for what seemed like a very long time. At one point, he opened his eyes and thought he might have drifted off to sleep just a little after all, but it couldn't have been for long.

One thing was certain: when the second big accident of the night happened, Davy Abbott was wide awake. Davy Abbott was sitting straight up. And Davy Abbott was screaming.

The moose had been fast asleep when the growl of a nearby predator scared him from his hiding spot. Now, although every instinct said it was the middle of the night, he looked into the oncoming light and thought he saw approaching dawn.

The station wagon's hood crumpled like the pages of an old, wet comic book. The moose, a woolly mammoth of a thing unlike any animal Davy had ever seen, crashed sideways onto what was left of the engine and then up into the windshield. Before the animal spun off the car, its antlers smashed through the glass just above the steering wheel. One of them entered Daddy's screaming face just above his nose.

The car swerved to the right. The moose slid up the windshield, and for a moment Davy thought the animal would crush the top of the car down into them. The creature fell sideways instead. One scooped section of antler pulled out of the mess that had been Daddy's head like a spoon from Mommy's mixing

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bowl, carrying with it a taste of what might have been chunky strawberry Jell-O.

In the back seat, both boys gaped at the carnage in front of them. Davy had chunks of his father's flesh on his face and in his hair. A fresh puddle of urine dripped over the edge of the seat between his legs. Georgie yelled, and Manny howled, but Davy's own squealing nearly drowned out the both of them. Daddy was gone, dead, and Mommy had a long, dark gash running from the corner of one eye to the tip of her chin. She was moving, so she was probably still mostly okay, but all the blood streaming down her face made Davy want to puke.

While his father's blood oozed down Davy's nose and into his open mouth, Davy turned around to watch the moose topple onto the road. For a moment, the animal simply stood there, as if it weren't hurt at all, as if this had all been a game of bumper cars. After another second, the moose slumped, its neck twisted back like a broken toy's. One hind leg gave a final twitch, and then the beast lay still. By the time the car had veered the rest of the way off the pavement, the moose was lost in the darkness and Davy had turned back to face the front.

At the boys' feet, Manny continued his yowling. The howl quickly became a whine, a sound that reminded Davy of the feedback screech from the microphone in the school auditorium. He tried to pull his feet up onto the seat beneath him so he wouldn't accidentally kick the scrambling dog.

Up front, Daddy's body slumped, and the car sped up. The station wagon rolled across the shoulder, thumped over a ditch and slid into a grove of trees.

Mommy was trying to grab the steering wheel, but her hands kept slipping in the running, red mess.

Georgie started to scream something when the wagon barely missed a twisted white trunk on the left. Maybe the word would have been *Mommy* or *Daddy*, or maybe it would have been nothing but a meaningless whoop of terror. Whatever the sound might or might not have become, Georgie never got the chance to finish it. The station wagon hit something, and they all

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flopped forward. Daddy's body hit the steering wheel, Mommy jerked against her seatbelt, and Davy flew face first into his mommy's headrest. Georgie, who, like his brother, had not had his seatbelt fastened but who was a bit taller and sitting directly between the two front seats, bounced up and flew through the shattered windshield.

Mommy reached for him, screaming, but she was much too late.

Georgie disappeared over the side of the hood and into the night, and although Davy tried to track him, his eyes had filled with blurring tears. And really, it was probably too dark to see anything that didn't lie directly in the path of the wagon's one remaining headlight anyway.

Davy screeched his brother's name.

Somehow, they continued moving forward. The car rolled deep into the trees before its front tire finally drove up a dark, arched trunk. Everything flipped upside down. The ground vibrated beneath Davy. He blinked his eyes and found himself lying facedown on the station wagon's roof.

Something warm and wet slid beside him. He looked over and saw the stump of gore where his father's head had been. His mother was still in her seat, strapped in by her belt, but when he tried to look up at her face, a fan of loose dirt sprayed across his eyes and forced him to turn away. The car skidded on. He reached out blindly and searched for Manny with the tips of his fingers. Clutter surrounded him: maps, a cook stove, clothes and pillows and all sorts of junk. He thought he sensed movement from his left but didn't get a chance to look because the station wagon slid hard into the trunk of another tree, and everything jolted to a stop. Davy had time for one last waking thought before things went totally dark: all of this—the blood and the death and the screaming and the agony—all of it was his fault.

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Davy woke to the sound of rain.

Fat drops pelted the car's undercarriage above him. The miniature drumbeats combined with the sound of the suckling earth outside the broken windows to make a scary sound like a vampire eating. The noise only partly covered the sound of approaching footsteps.

The confusion of waking in a strange, dark place didn't last long. Once Davy remembered where he was and what had happened, his first crazy thought was that the footsteps were coming from the moose, that the monster had returned to finish what it started, that the footsteps were actually hoofsteps and that he, Davy, was a goner. His next, slightly more coherent thought was that the approaching sounds meant Georgie had survived the throw from the runaway wagon and was coming back to see if the rest of them had been as lucky.

But the sounds weren't coming from the moose or his brother.

Though both the wagon's headlights had gone out, one of the taillights still shone. The light was as dim as the Snoopy nightlight Davy sometimes used back home, but it was bright enough to reveal the pair of stained leather boots approaching the rear fender.

Davy wasn't sure how long he'd been out. Two minutes? Two hours? These boots might belong to a policeman or a fireman, someone who'd come to help them.

Davy tried to lift his head off the floor, which he remembered was actually the roof, and wondered how many of them were left to save. It was a sick thought, a very bad thought, but he knew his daddy was gone. Was his mommy dead, too? What about Manny and Georgie? Was his brother lying broken out there in the rain?

He tried to yell that he was alive, that he needed help, that his family needed help, but no sound came out. The pair of leather boots circled around the side of the station wagon, and Davy tried lifting his head again. He strained every muscle he could move, but before he got his chin more than three inches into the air, the world darkened around him again.

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This time, Davy woke on his back in the rain. The rain had picked up; the water hitting Davy in the face felt like the spray from their bathroom shower. The rain ran up his nose and down his throat. He turned his head to the left and coughed. Snot dripped out of his nostrils, and he tried to flip onto his side, but an enormous hand grabbed his arm and spun him back onto his shoulders hard enough to knock his breath out.

Davy gasped. Or tried to. There seemed to be more water than oxygen in the air, and half of what slipped down into his lungs was liquid. He coughed again and retched until his stomach hurt. When he tried to turn onto his side a second time, no one stopped him. He spit out a mouthful of rainwater and vomit and shook his dripping head from side to side until he could see a little.

There was more light now. With his eyes fully open, he became aware of it almost immediately. The car's taillight still burned—the red tint to everything around him proved that—but something brighter and far more powerful had joined it. Davy could *see*.

At this point, he had no idea which direction was which, but he thought this new light might be coming from the road. He tried looking for the source, but before he could find it, he saw the slumped form sitting against the base of a nearby tree.

His father.

The moose's antenna hadn't completely destroyed his head. The bottom part of his face, his lips and teeth and one mostly detached ear, remained. Above these things was a jagged bowl half filled with a rising pool of rain.

He'd watched the accident from less than a foot away, but this somehow seemed worse. To see his father's body tossed to the side, collecting rain like a backyard birdbath, made him want to scream.

He heard wet smacking sounds behind him and turned. The pair of stained leather boots was backing away from the overturned station wagon.

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The man above the boots hunched over, tugging at something inside the car, but even so, Davy could tell he was tall and husky. He wore his checked flannel shirt tucked into the waist of a tight pair of jeans. Davy couldn't make out his face; a mane of dark, shaggy hair covered the back of the man's head. The rain running out of this hairy jungle was brown and thick, as if the guy hadn't washed the dirt out of his hair in months.

Before Davy could think to do anything at all, he saw what was happening. One of the side windows had shattered. What first appeared to be a long, white branch growing out through the frame turned out to be a pale, limp arm. The man, holding tight to the wrist, yanked the way Davy's Daddy yanked the lawnmower's start cord. Davy continued to stare; the booted man jerked on the arm again, and Davy's mother came sliding through the window.

The man backed away from the station wagon, never letting go of the arm. Moving carefully but deliberately backward, he dragged Davy's mother through the mud toward Davy and finally let her drop to the ground. The mud splatter from her falling body hit Davy across both eyes, but not before he'd seen the blank, lifeless expression on his mother's tumbling face.

Dead. Like his father. Gone.

He wanted to deny it, to tell himself she was okay, that she'd look over at him any second and smile, but he knew better. He wouldn't let his mind play tricks on him.

Mr. Boots turned back to the car without saying a word. He came close enough to the station wagon to touch it, dropped to his knees, and poked his head in through the windowless frame.

Davy turned to his mother. She had landed with her face pointed mostly away from him, but Davy could still see the caked blood on her cheek and a single vacant eye. He flipped onto his elbows and crawled to her. Her hair floated in the mud around her head. Davy reached out and tilted her face so her glazed eyes faced the sky. The rain had already washed away

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most of the blood, but Davy knew it couldn't wash away the deep gash running from her cheek to her jaw to her neck. He dropped his forehead to hers and cried.

It wasn't fair. His daddy and his mommy both in one night. How could something like this happen?

He heard more noises from the car. Mr. Boots emerged from the shattered window with a furry, writhing body curled into the crook of one arm.

Manny.

Davy said the dog's name, and the sound coming out of his mouth sounded so wrong, so high-pitched and alien, that he immediately wished he could take it back.

"Not gonna make it," Mr. Boots said, his voice deep, booming. Mr. Boots dropped the beagle to the ground the same way he had dropped Davy's mother. Manny bounced once, like a half-deflated basketball, and then lay still. He moaned. Davy didn't think he'd ever be able to forget that sound. Manny didn't quiet until Mr. Boots lifted one of his own hefty legs and brought his boot down hard on the dog's throat.

Davy choked again, and this time he lost his breath altogether. He gasped and cried and tried to scream all at once.

Mr. Boots looked over at him and brought his foot down again, softer than the first time but hard enough to snap at least a few more bones in Manny's poor, unmoving body.

Davy's own worthless body continued to betray him. When Mr. Boots walked over to Davy, all the boy could do was drop to his mother's chest and cling to it like an infant.

"It's just you and me now," Mr. Boots said and reached down to pull Davy onto his knees.

Davy shook his head, trying to stifle another bout of hysterical sobs. "Nuh...hu, no. My broth...my Georgie." He couldn't believe his family was gone. His *whole* family. He *wouldn't* believe it.

Mr. Boots frowned. His face had deep wrinkles, but in other ways he didn't look any older than Davy's father. The man's frown suddenly reversed itself, and the smile revealed half a

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dozen toothless gaps. Mr. Boots pulled Davy to his feet and pointed over the car wreck.

He saw Georgie, his brother, pinned to a tree trunk fifteen feet away, dangling so the toes of his sneakers floated two feet above the ground, jabbed onto the sharp stub of a broken limb. Davy couldn't understand how Georgie could have flown from the car and ended up so close to the final wreck site. It wasn't possible, was it?

Davy looked up at the man in the checkered shirt, Mr. Boots, and the stranger giggled.

"You and me," he repeated. "Just the two of us." He jammed his hands beneath Davy's armpits and lifted him until their noses came within an inch of touching. "Someone up there's been listening." He looked up into the growing storm and then back into Davy's eyes. Without warning, he pulled the boy close and kissed him on the lips.

Davy tried to squirm away, but the stranger had a superhero's strength. With nothing else to do, Davy closed his eyes and cringed until the man's lips left his face.

"Don't worry," the stranger crooned. "We'll get this mess all cleaned up before anybody does so much as *think* about noticing." He flung Davy over his shoulder, ignored the boy's fists beating against his spine, and headed back toward the road.