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Lie of the Land

Written by Michael F. Russell

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Lie of the Land

MICHAEL F. RUSSELL

Polygon

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10 Newington Road
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For Helena, Danny and Joe

October

1

Carl closed the graveyard's rusty metal gate, breathing hard, lungs aching from the effort of walking. What was it – about half a mile from the hotel? Too fast, he'd gone far too fast for a body that had spent most of a month lying flat and then a week shuffling between rooms.

Crows rasped in the trees as the wind freshened from off the sea. The place reeked of wet earth and rotting leaves. He felt light-headed, dizzy, the fresh air knifing his lungs. He coughed, hawking a gobbet onto the gravel path that skirted the graveyard.

He soon found Howard's grave, a fresh mound next to those of the two German tourists. Carl stood for a while, then dropped to his haunches and scooped a handful of earth from Howard's grave.

An oystercatcher alarm-called as it flew, arrowing level with the dark-rock shoreline. He had come to know the sound of the bird. The soil was cold and sticky in his hand.

'Sorry,' he whispered, throwing the handful back onto the pile. His throat tightened. 'Why did I fucking listen to you? Why did I let you do it?' He gasped for breath. 'Where is everything? What am I doing here?'

Now that the fever had left him, realising where he was and what had happened threatened to blot out every other thought and feeling. Consciousness without purpose was now the dominant state. Never waking up at all would have been better.

Mistakes: to the nth power.

The world was dead, and he had helped kill it, in his own little

way. Call it a sin of omission. Carl could add his only friend to the list of the dead while he was at it. There was guilt enough to gorge on, with extra guilt to go. It entered his bloodstream with every breath, all washed down with a cold glass of grief.

He stood for a moment, staring down at the grave. Insects crawled on the rectangular mound of earth. They had a job to do, above and below the ground. Wind stirred the trees again, making them sway and creak. Everything had an appointed function, except him.

There was an obvious destination: somewhere he had to go. As he looked around the bay, judging distances, Carl wondered if he could make it. Going back to where Howard died meant taking one of two routes: he could cross to the south headland, on the main road, before heading inland and into the hills. But that meant going through the main part of the village. Which meant people, and the gauntlet of shock and sympathy. Or he could continue the way he had come, up the back road over the north headland. That way he'd avoid people, but it also took him away from where he needed to go, behind the village, over rough ground, circling around Inverlair and to the south. Call it nine miles of trudging through heather and bogs. That would take him hours, if he managed it at all. With no real conviction, he set off for the hard way.

On the back road up and out of Inverlair Bay, past the church and the community hall and the start of the forestry track, he made it as far as the roadblock, a line of shin-high boulders splashed with red paint. Never mind being at the edge of the world, he couldn't have gone much further anyway.

He sat on the stones, gasping for breath. To his right, over a rusty barbed-wire fence, fields of rushes and thistles sloped down towards the grey sea. He scanned the horizon for a white boat, for salvation, but saw nothing except the fusing of cloud and water.

Some way off the road was a derelict old house, windowless,

with a ragged corrugated-iron roof. To his left, the hills rose to the fissured rocky summit of Ben Bronach, and beyond, to the deer forest. After a few minutes Carl got up and, standing at the roadblock with his hands in his coat pockets, considered the road ahead. He stepped over the painted boulders.

Maybe today was the day when the world would open up again. He could drive away from Inverlair. He could leave Room 14 and Simone and the baby, today, the eighty-second day of his confinement. This would be the last day he'd have to spend here, in this prison refuge. The redzone would open. Its signal would fail.

He took Howard's deltameter out of his pocket and watched the EMF waveform on the screen, spiking at 85 microtesla today, close to the active neural level. Another hundred metres or so and, he knew, the buzzing sound would start in his head. Another two hundred after that and the pain would skewer through his head, from temple to temple. Any further and sleep was death.

Today was not the day. But he'd known that anyway. There would be no escape. Even before he took his dead friend's gadget out of his pocket to check the signal he knew what it would tell him.

•

The next day, he stood in Room 14's en suite, in front of the mirror. Pits of ash where his eyes had been, thick phlegm-flecked beard and limp coils of oily hair.

With a pair of borrowed scissors he cut his beard to a point where shaving could finish the job. Without hot water it stung and he nicked the skin a few times as he went, hair filling the sink, red drops on the thin scum of soap and grease. Even though the razor was blunt he managed to shave off half his beard, stopping to touch the hairless side of his face, the fever-scooped hollows where his cheeks had been. Two months ago his face had been full and he hadn't felt like a decrepit wreck of a man.

Death had looked in on him, given his lungs a squeeze, then let him go. *I'll be back later for you, pal. Take care of yourself – until I take care of you.*

Neck next, and he was done; now to complete the transformation, from stinking caveman to heroin chic all in a few snips. Reaching above his ear he gathered a handful of greasy, matted hair, and started cutting until he was right down to the scalp. Getting rid of his hair made the scab on his forehead stand out. He tried to forget how it had happened, and continued cutting. The person he'd been must be somewhere underneath this feral disguise. He must be.

That night, Carl stood on the hotel's first-floor landing. Above the dark stairwell there was a stained-glass window, red roses and green petals on a blue background, the full moon blazing the colours alive. He heard an owl hooting. This is Tuesday, he said to himself, as he gazed, open-mouthed, at the moon-bright glass. Nearly a week since the fever had left his bleached bones washed up in a single bed.

He was hungry again. Appetite had been reborn. And that was a good thing, on balance. Resurrection. Coming back from the brink. Five days he'd been up and about, and now it was time to visit the ground floor. Maybe even rejoin what was left of the human race. He was in the grip of life now. He took a deep breath and, as planned, his lungs cracked a volley of phlegm, which he spat into a hankie. In the soundless night, it wouldn't do to cough in an inconvenient place and alert anyone to his presence.

On his seventh step down, the stairs creaked. Carl held his breath, gaping up at the stained-glass roses shining in the moonlight. What did he expect to happen? Simone's dad come stomping through from the annexe, dressing gown flying, shotgun at the ready? The only sound was the clock ticking in the lobby; moon glinting on the brass pendulum as it measured the night.

It was even darker on the ground floor as Carl made his way

along the lobby past reception, through the fire door and into the annexe, cupping the candle, which he'd stuck onto a saucer. He waited a few seconds, listening out for signs of life, letting the fire door swing gently back into place. But there was nothing except his own breathing as he crept into the kitchen. It was still warm; he could feel heat radiating from the stove. There wasn't much to eat: the remains of a mushroom omelette in the fridge along with milk and some butter, still chilled, even though the generator was off for the night. And fish, of course. At least there was no question of an Omega 3 deficiency. No danger of that in this place. Insanity maybe, but at least his heart wouldn't pack in.

He set the candle and saucer down on the worktop, next to a kid's storybook. Simone kept things as normal as she could for her boy. Fair play to her.

Carl ate.

Scoffing the greasy slab of omelette with his fingers, he saw an open black bin bag on the wicker kitchen chair. He reached into it.

His jaw stopped working.

The bag was full of baby clothes, sleepsuits and tiny vests. He lowered the candle to read the handwritten label taped to the bag: Under Three Months.

He laid a sleepsuit out flat on the table, adjusting the position of the candle so he could get a better look. The suit was pink with little smiling teddies on it. The bag of clothes certainly answered The Burning Question. Carl imagined the pink suit filled with a screaming, red-faced baby.

Without warning the candle fell over and went out, the air heavy with smoke.

Darkness.

Fuck. He hadn't melted enough wax on to the saucer.

He wondered if he could negotiate his way back upstairs, in darkness, without knocking anything over. As he visualised the obstacles, his eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light. Gathering

candle and saucer, he crept into the hallway. There were no windows in the corridor between the annexe and the actual hotel, and it was darker there, but he could still make out all the important shapes to avoid, the edge of the reception desk. And the big brass bell, on its stand by the front door, a touch of baronial charm for the tourists. Better not knock that bugger over.

He was near the annexe fire door when he heard a sound from upstairs. It was Simone's dad, George, sobbing, groaning and calling out in his sleep. Carl froze. There came another, quieter moan. Then silence.

Bad dream, probably. Everyone had them. Dreams of death, playing on a loop. Anyway, there was now food in his belly, and he felt like he needed something to wash it down.

Making his way through to the public bar he nudged a table, low to his left, and set something rocking on top of it. The ornament, or whatever it was, shook, but stayed upright, thank Christ.

And breathe again. Take it slow through another fire door, between the chairs and tables. Past the pool table, baize under his fingertips. He mustn't rush it. There was always the unexpected obstacle.

He reached the storeroom door. There were no windows here, so the moon couldn't light his way. Easy does it now, one slow foot-sliding step at a time. He edged to the back of the storeroom, knew which forgotten cardboard box to find, felt the edge of the cold metal filing cabinet, then down and along to the box. Flipping the flaps open he took out four bottles, one at a time, careful not to let them clink together. Carl put a bottle into each pocket of his dressing gown, carried the other two in one hand, by their necks, candle and saucer in the other hand. He was fully laden now, and there was no room for mistakes. Watch that table in the corridor. Mind the big brass bell. Ease open the fire door, hook it with a foot. Let it sink back nice and quiet. And whatever happens, don't bloody cough.

For the second night in a row Carl sat in Room 14, on the edge of his bed, four bottles of lime-green alcofizz inside him. He watched his palmpod's on-screen clock count the seconds, considered – then rejected – the idea of watching a certain personal video file.

Tomorrow he would have to endure real-time interaction with George and Simone. He'd put that off for long enough.

The booze he had just guzzled equated to less than two pints, but he was pissed nonetheless. Weight loss and illness had reduced his tolerance for alcohol. It was 2.37 a.m. He lurched over to the windowsill, unsteady on his feet. The fat bluebottle that only this morning had bounced and buzzed against the room's dormer window, in thrall to the light, was dead, stiff legs in the air. He had watched the fly pound the glass, unable to stop what it was doing. If only the fly had known the impossibility of breaking through the glass it might have stopped. It might have accepted imprisonment and fate, making no fuss about its situation and inevitable end in Room 14 of Inverlair Hotel. That would be the sensible thing to do.

Rolling into bed, he pulled the duvet around him and closed his eyes. He dreamed of a giant baby that cried all night and would never go to sleep. Being so big, the screaming kid was dangerous. It might roll over and crush the life he'd only just regained back out of him.

2

Brittle brown leaves swirled around the garden. Staring into space George stood, rake in hand. Wind ruffled his grey hair. It was cold today. Dry. His jacket was on but wasn't zipped up against the morning chill. George tried not to look at the carved oak bench nestling beneath the ivy-covered trellis at the bottom of the garden. Maybe he should store it in the shed now. The bench could do with a coat of wood stain anyway, and that's something he could never face doing.

It had been their bench; the two of them used to sit on it. In future there would be only him. Maybe he should stick the bench in the shed after all. No luck with the leaves today, too windy to rake them up.

He stood there, clutching the rake, as the dead leaves flew where the wind took them. Part of him wanted to smash the bench into pieces.

Unless George kept tight control, it would start in his stomach, the spasm of awareness, and from there it would engulf him. Pain and sadness would sweep him away, and he would crumble again. But remembering was so sweet, even as it made ashes of his heart. That was the thing he couldn't get right in his head: the sweetness of letting memory swim in his blood, and the nausea of grief that came with remembering her. He was frightened of remembering his wife, and just as frightened of forgetting her.

He examined the rake he held in his hands, looked towards the pine trees and the hills as if someone was there, in the distance, waiting for him.

What had he been doing? No luck with the leaves. Too windy to bother with them.

'Dad!' Simone stood on the back step of the annexe, a cardboard box in her hands. George thought he heard a voice. He found himself staring at his daughter, and remembering laughter from long ago.

'Come and see what I've found in the loft.'

Let the leaves swirl and leave the rubbish in the loft, girl. Nothing up there but dust.

George straightened his back. 'What is it?' He put the rake back in the garden shed, in its proper place.

Simone came over, took a small paper sachet out of the box for her father to sniff; in the box there were many more: coffee, sugar, tiny cartons of milk and — holy of holies — about twenty cellophane mini-packs of biscuits, two in each. Shortbread, mainly, but there were a few custard creams.

George's face fell. 'We ordered too much stock. Then the bookings dried up. It was before you came back.' He sniffed the coffee again. 'We stopped putting them in the rooms after that.'

He dropped the sachet back in the box, bit hard on the memory. Can't keep that kind of pain in the fucking shed. 'This should really be handed in to the committee,' he said, wiping his hands on his trousers.

'It will,' said Simone, trying to catch her father's eye. 'But I thought we could sit down and have a cup of coffee and a biscuit first. One each, that's all.'

She smiled. George nodded, touched his daughter's arm, and they went inside.

Stale. He figured the biscuit would be, but it was still satisfyingly sweet. George sipped his coffee, fingering crumbs on the tabletop. He thought about how he could broach the subject of the father-to-be who was lurking upstairs.

The oak bench would not be moved from its place.

•

That evening, Carl crept along the annexe hallway. The kitchen door was open and he could see the table laid for dinner, pots bubbling away on the stove; George was fussing over the food as Simone sat at the table, her son on her lap.

'I can't fix the games visor, darling. I don't know why it's broken.'

But Isaac wasn't entirely convinced by his mother's lack of expertise. She had to fix it. The visor had to be fixed so he could play the game. Why couldn't she see that?

Carl coughed in the kitchen doorway, rubbing the stubble on his head self-consciously. The kid looked at him, open-mouthed, eyes wide.

Clothes too big. Shirt like a sack. Trousers belted on a skewered hole. Carl felt like shit and probably looked it too. Can't blame the kid for staring.

Standing at the kitchen door, he wasn't quite sure what to do. He shifted from foot to foot. 'Smells good.'

Startled at first, George said hello and went back to his pots, ladling stew into bowls. Carl sat down at the table.

As he ate, he became conscious of the watchers and the silence. Maybe he shouldn't have made the effort to smarten himself up. He glanced round the table, carried on eating. 'I'm still alive,' he stated. 'I'm not the ghost at the feast, I hope.'

George sniffed. 'I wouldn't call it a feast.'

Carl smiled. 'Thanks.' He caught Simone's eye. 'For everything.'

She nodded.

The boy had lost interest in his food. Isaac was silent, eyeing the skeletal stranger from upstairs who had appeared like magic, like the first time. Only back then lots of bad things had happened. Maybe he was going to make more bad things happen this time.

Carl slurped his stew, though he had no appreciation of what

he was eating, only a studied lifting of the spoon. He began to sweat, food and silent awkwardness going to work on him.

'The *Aurora* was out the other day and came across a yacht, a big one,' said George, trying to ease the tension.

'Yeah,' said Carl, the food dry in his mouth. 'Simone said.' He took a sip of water.

George offered another forkful of food to Isaac, but the boy squirmed in his seat, lips clamped shut and eyes on Carl. George shook his head, exasperated. 'You're far too old for this nonsense. Do we have any of those biscuits left?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'But I do know there is something sweet for boys who eat their dinner.'

George pressed the fork up to the boy's mouth. It could have been a shit-covered slug Isaac was being asked to eat, but, after a prolonged show of disgust, he accepted the piece of boiled carrot.

'It's a pity about the yacht,' said Carl.

Isaac chewed another mouthful. Every time Carl spoke he felt pinned back by the boy's stare. Maybe the kid knows the truth.

'A lot of gear on a boat that size,' agreed George. 'She wasn't in sail, probably broke her moorings down the coast in the storm last week. But the tide took her into the redzone.'

The only two questions that mattered to Carl had been answered: the redzone was still there and Simone was still pregnant. Nothing else really mattered.

'Too bad,' he said.

His mind blank, Carl ate quickly, desperate to leave the table. Isaac's unyielding scrutiny hastened his exit.

Stop staring at me, you little fucker, or I'll stick that fork in your fucking eye.

After dinner he made for the hotel's residents' lounge, where a fire burned beneath a grand hardwood mantelpiece. There was a massive portrait above the fireplace, of some bewigged gentleman of yore gleaming with brocade and buckles, a sword hanging by

his side. The guy had more or less founded Inverlair, back when war meant Napoleon. Captain Theodore Melkins looked very satisfied with himself, his military colours and stern smugness glowing above the mantelpiece. It's amazing how something as simple as processing potash from seaweed could make a man important enough to be preserved in oils.

Carl went over to the bookshelves. He pulled out a book on geology, and sat down by the fire.

He read: 'The Moine Thrust is a linear geological feature in the Scottish Highlands which runs . . . extensive landscape of rolling hills over a metamorphic . . . Ben More Assynt (pictured) in the centre of the belt, is a typical example that rises from a glen of limestone caves . . .'

He recognised the picture in the book straight away. There was no mistaking it. Now he had a name to go with the unmistakable image of the mountain. Suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, a hail shower machine-gunned against the high casement windows. Carl jumped at the sound of ice clattering on glass.

Fetching a dog-eared road atlas, he traced a path all the way up from Glasgow, along the edge of the Moine Thrust, until he found Ben More Assynt on the map. He recognised it from the drive up, a million years before, looming like something out of legend. Now he knew the mountain's name; maybe he'd climb it one day. Everything has an identity: a name and a purpose. Even hills. That was the rule. Surely there were still rules to obey.

Tectonics and the Moine Thrust were the reason for Ben More Assynt's existence. Shifts and faults and time: a combination that could produce innumerable consequences.

He pulled another book from the shelf: *Highland Animals*. Flicking though the pages he learned that adders are Britain's only poisonous snakes and are found throughout the Highlands. *Vipera berus* was sure to sink its fangs into him at some point. Perhaps its bite would prove fatal.

3

Thick cord rattled against the metal flagpole. Maybe another electrical storm was on its way.

Carl looked up at the gathering clouds, and wondered what would happen if lightning struck the viewpoint flagpole. Would an arc of current reach out and fry him?

No flag flew above Inverlair. Maybe the pole had never been used. But there were wooden picnic benches, flaking apart, below on the crumbling concrete platforms, and the concrete stairway that led to the viewpoint was overgrown with a gnarled prickly plant. It had yellow flowers: dollops of sunlight on stunted branches. Honeysuckle was yellow – he knew that, so maybe that's what the plant was. Surrounding the flagpole, at the highest point of the picnic site, was a waist-high concrete wall. Carl picked his way up the steps, his jeans snagging on inch-long thorns.

He was now facing inland and had a clear view of the whole village, the steel-grey length of Inverlair Bay, and the tops of the mountains beyond, to the south and east. The hills in the distance could be five miles away, or they could be fifty. It was impossible to tell. There was an interpretative weatherproofed plaque, angled like a lectern, set into the viewpoint's wall. Each mountain peak on the inland horizon was named, and the area's geology described. The plaque told him he was exactly 190 metres above sea level.

The wind whipped the flagpole's cord again. Carl turned up his collar against the cold breeze, read the rest of what was written on the plaque, then took the steps back down to the path that

eventually came out near the hotel's moss-covered car park. One old car – tyres flat, packed with junk – lay abandoned in a corner.

Almost a thousand metres of ice. That's what the plaque had said. Ten thousand years ago there would only have been the tops of the highest hills poking through, nothing but rock and scree and the grinding ice advance.

The path down to the hotel branched off and took him onto the north road, beyond the last house, where he could relax, the pressure of curious others falling away. He turned up the forestry track and headed inland, between blocks of tightly packed pine trees, up the boulder-strewn slopes of Ben Bronach. Two hundred metres up from the road, beyond the greying swarf of felled timber, an excavator-type digger stood, hydraulic arm poised. Yesterday he had seen it working, roaring, buzz-sawing, stripping and sectioning trunks into manageable lengths, each one processed in less than a minute. He walked the wide access track into the scented forest, climbing, then along a narrow trail, teasing out the contours of Ben Bronach, on a walk he knew too well.

On the hill's shoulder he looked down on the village. Inverlair was definitely a rosier prospect from here than seeing it up close. He felt his mind wander, growing less focused. Up here on the hillside there was nothing but wind and open sky to bother him. Even in the middle of Glasgow he hadn't felt so suffocated, even with CivCon snoopers breathing down his neck 24/7. It was good to get out, to get better, good to walk out of the hotel and away from the village. He was stronger now; a week of generous portions had fattened him.

He walked.

There was only one destination that mattered. No point in pretending otherwise. Now that he was well enough he could get there easy enough, following the sheep track through Ben Bronach's gullies, along the hill's northern ridge.

He made the edge of the inland moors in less than an hour,

through heather and rushes and bracken, past wind-shivering pools; a bird, some kind of raptor, vigilant, gliding away over the village and the arms of the bay. He walked on, heading downhill off the ridge this time, to where the River Lair rose, oozing from the blanket bog through numberless pores and streams and capillaries.

Dr Morgan had told him not to overdo things for at least two weeks. A stroll around the village was okay, she said, until he got his strength back. Perhaps she would take a dim view of a nine-mile hike up into the squelching hills on a chilly October day. But he was stronger now, and anyway, he had to go to a certain place. There was unfinished business to finish. And he had to walk. If he stopped he would go crazy.

Skirting an outlying house at the head of the bay, he started climbing the southern hills, moving away from the sea all the time, but still able to make out the river, sunk deep into the fathoms of peat, before it plunged through Inverlair at the head of the bay. Further on and he crested the hill's swelling moorland summit, where he could no longer see the sea or the bay.

Here he was.

Below him, in a deep glen, was the same farmhouse, the door still wide open, the Range Rover still with one wheel in a stream, and the driver, or what was left of him, scattered between the vehicle and his idyllic downsized cottage-industry-cum-bolthole. The recording in Carl's head raced to its screaming climax.

This is the edge of the Inverlair notspot. This is the end. This is where it happened.

Heart pounding, Carl spun from what he saw and remembered, and half-ran back towards the village. After a while he stopped, turned around.

No point in running away. Better to let it in, to face it. That was the way it had to be done.

A while later he was sitting on the ground, looking down at the

farmhouse and Range Rover, waterproof trousers keeping out the wet but not the cold on his arse. He took Howard's deltameter out of his pocket; there were spikes right across the waveform. This was almost as far as he could go before the redzone started to bite. He coughed, pain in his chest. Perhaps he'd pushed himself too hard.

This pilgrimage, this penance, hadn't turned out the way he thought it would. Here was the place where the knife had been twisted, where Howard had died. There should be a reckoning, or at least a revelation of some sort. But, after the shock of remembering that day had subsided, there was nothing, just the impassive context of land and sky.

From his pocket he took out a bottle of water and a plastic bag containing four slices of venison and two waxy cubes of polycarb. Without taking his eyes from the farmhouse, he ate and drank. It might rain; in borrowed clothing he'd be safe and dry.

He just wouldn't mention it. That was the way to handle things with Simone. Keep ignoring it and it'll go away. It: growing inside her, not yet a bump. A lump? Embryo or foetus? There was no accelerated hormonal flood to swell her like a balloon, give her all sorts of cravings and mood swings. She would be an invalid in a few months' time. Isn't that what happened? He would end up doing everything for her. She would expect that, and so would everyone else.

He shook his head. It was hard to believe. The more he thought about it, the more unjust and unfair it seemed. It was almost funny. By next spring, it would come along, and the non-stop crying and shitting would start. Isn't that what happens? And what would Isaac think — the kid who already thought the Grim Reaper stayed upstairs?

Man appears. Granny vanishes. Everyone gets sad and starts crying. Now man reappears, and Mum's talking about a baby. Man is the baby's daddy, but he is not my daddy. The man from upstairs was the angel of life and death. But maybe kids didn't think like

that, didn't mull over all the ins and outs of a situation. He didn't know how they thought.

It couldn't be ignored, though. Not a hope in hell. Younger guys might carry on as before until reality kicked them in their dog-blind bollocks. But he couldn't push it away, could he? There was no bump yet. Nothing obvious. But it was coming. He could wriggle and struggle and ignore it all he liked. She could miscarry. There was still time.

From the north a gunshot cracked, breaking Carl's febrile cascade of thoughts. The sound bounced around the bay, fading into a scatter of echoes. He cocked an ear, looked towards Ben Bronach and the ridge, but the gun was not fired again.

Must be the stalker.

Should really go and say thanks to the guy. But Carl didn't even know what he looked like. He'd get round to it. Soon.

It was no small thing what the man had done.

A crescent moon came out from behind the clouds. Birds flew towards the forest for the night, and the wind picked up.

Better get used to it. Better forget about what once had been out there, including himself. Everything is here. There's no point trying to deny the truth of that. But it wasn't easy, and just thinking about it made him want to tear his hair out, hurt himself, do something crazy. How could the world just cease to exist? How could it all be unreachable, a shadowy realm of the past? What kind of arrangement was that to come smacking out of clear blue nothing? The whole thing was deranged. Rotten. But the world had been pretty deranged and rotten before the redzone threw a curtain of delta wave sleep around Inverlair. It was no change of state, really, just an end to all the familiar derangement he had known.

Carl pulled his hat down over his ears and shivered. It was getting dark, and the first nameless stars had come out. At the far end of the glen, pools of still water, like spilt mercury, reflected the half-light in the soundless, windless evening.

People were watching him, judging him.

From somewhere below – in the farmhouse glen, but from precisely where he couldn't say – an animal noise boomed, a deep bellowing that rolled around the slopes. He stood still, listened.

A cow? It certainly wasn't a sheep or a dog; hell of a racket whatever it was, as if someone was retching into a toilet bowl. A deer?

He strained to hear.

Not a sound came from the glen, its electricity pylons carrying their dead wires to the silent south.

Wind gusted from the east.

In an instant it started blowing, with force, picking up bits of dry grass. A few seconds later and the first crackle of electricity fizzed across the upper atmosphere, then another flash, and another, until the ionosphere blazed with a tracery of angry voltage.

It was just like Howard had said.

The electrical storm crackled across the eastern sky, lighting up the dark hills. He felt small and exposed under the storm.

Carl hurried down the rocky slope to the main road, the Atlantic horizon still aglow, sky flashing and sparking behind him in the east. For a split second, he was relieved to be going back to the hotel. He almost formed the word home. There were four walls, a bed and a regular supply of calories given to him by other people. But there was nothing and no one he had known from the life before. Now there was just hunger and the redzone and the consequences of action and inaction.

As the wind dropped a little, the animal noise came again from the glen below, a roar that rang around the regimented forest. From deep in its throat the cow-dog-bear called, a moaning bass note that swelled and echoed.

Carl quickened his pace down the gloomy track, between the gorse, and into the dark trees that loomed along the back of isolated houses, stumbling in the fading light. The old fear was

behind him, on the hunt. After every few strides he cast a wild glance back through the wind-tossed trees, as if he were being followed, as if he were being watched and there was no escape, and nowhere to find rest.