

Chapter 2

The Jeep idled at the end of the access road to Jim's property, where it intersected Michigan State Route 28.

To the right, M-28 led past the little town of Au Train and then to Marquette and roads south through central Wisconsin. But getting any further south than Madison in the Jeep would be difficult, without a wide detour to the west around metropolitan Chicago-Milwaukee-Rockford, which was home to nearly twenty percent of the population of the United States. No legacy roads went through that area. In Madison, travelers could book passage on a car train to any number of cities further south if travelling efficiently was the goal. But getting there efficiently wasn't Jim's goal, and even if it were, to go that route Jim would need his comdev and all that went with it.

To the left, M-28 led through Munising and then across the center of Michigan's upper peninsula and to roads south to Saint Ignace and the Straits of Mackinac. While nearly all traffic between upper and lower Michigan used the Interstate 75 and the tunnel under the straits, the tunnel, and the entire length of I-75, from Sault Ste. Marie to Miami, was a self-driving, electric-only corridor. But there was another way across the Straits: the "Mighty Mac" suspension bridge, an aged pride of Michigan's transportation network, which was open to legacy traffic on Sundays.

"I like our chances to the left, Smudge. What do you say, left?"

Jim turned the Jeep left onto M-28 and accelerated to a comfortable speed. The road was paved but the surface was uneven, a patchwork of sealed cracks and filled potholes. Without a comdev there was no way to know what was the legal speed limit, but Jim was sure there was no way he would be able to exceed it, at least not safely. And even if he did speed for more than a few minutes, without his comdev, he wouldn't get a ticket. There were no highway patrols in rural areas because law enforcement had transitioned mostly to device tracking. Sure, people

could still turn off their comdevs, but the gps system in all modern cars could not be disabled. A driver who operated a vehicle unlawfully was automatically issued a ticket, and if the infraction was particularly egregious, the driver's car would be disabled remotely, with no recourse.

If a patrolman were to stop Jim, however, as unlikely as that would be, he would be detained. It was illegal to drive a vehicle without a comdev, which held a driver's electronically issued license, registration, and proof of insurance. He'd have to be careful about that.

Ever since Jim earned his driver's license he had enjoyed the privilege of driving. When he was younger, as the demands of life and work pressed upon him he always found solace on the road. Something about the fluidity of driving—whether it be following a curvy back road or flowing in heavy traffic—soothed his mind. The demands of driving occupied the parts of his mind that needed something to do and left other parts of his mind free to think more clearly, to problem solve without distraction, and to reminisce. As Jim had grown older, there was less problem solving, and more reminiscing, and on this day, as the excitement of departure subsided, Jim thought back to a heartbreaking call he remembered so well.

"Hey Jim."

"Hi Rachel, can you talk?"

"Yes, I have some time. What's up?"

"Not much..." Jim started, but then there was a long pause. He hadn't thought through what he would say if Rachel answered. "I'm just wondering how you're doing," he continued "you seemed kinda out of it last weekend, and it just seems you're distant these days, and I'm wondering what's going on."

"Nothing, Jim. We already went over this. Everything is fine and I really don't want to talk about it anymore."

"But Rachel, you're not the same these days. Something is going on. I've known you for a long time. I know your moods, when you're up, when you're down. It's obvious, and just saying that everything is fine doesn't make everything fine. Why don't you just tell me what's going on?"

"Jim, I don't want to talk about this now."

"Why not? We're not going to be together again for a while, and honestly, this is driving me a little crazy. Knowing that we are not the same as we were, but you saying everything is fine. It doesn't make sense and I'm asking you to tell me what's up."

"Okay, Jim, you really want to know?"

"Yes!"

Jim heard a click as Rachel took the conversation off speaker, then he heard her voice louder and much more clearly. "Okay, look, I've been seeing someone else, okay? Someone I met a few months ago, who's here when you're not."

The pace of the conversation slowed at this point, Jim remembered. He replied "Yeah, that's what I thought... I want to come see you."

"No, you were just here."

"I can drive back. I can leave tomorrow after work and be there in the morning. I want to talk about this in person."

"I don't want you to come here now Jim. I'm not free."

"Why not?"

"I'm just not. Don't come, Jim!" Rachel said angrily.

“Look,” Jim said with more determination, “we have so much together. Yes, we spend a lot of time apart, but when we’re together it’s great. Isn’t it great when we are together, doesn’t it feel right?”

“Yes Jim, it does... it did. But this just isn’t going anywhere anymore...” her voice trailed off.

“So I am not going to see you again?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know, I can’t promise anything.” Rachel said softly.

“I’m going to come see you.”

“No, don’t do that.”

“Why not?” Jim asked, not because he thought Rachel would change her mind but just to keep the conversation alive. She didn’t answer.

“Rachel?” Jim said again, knowing that she had already disconnected.

The part of Jim’s mind that was driving jolted back the part of Jim’s mind that was wandering as a deer bolted across the road fifty feet in front of the Jeep. Jim applied the brakes firmly and Smudge slipped forward off his bed to the passenger side floor. Jim slowed the Jeep and proceeded cautiously watching the margins on either side of the road for more deer. Up ahead he noticed the remains of a roadside rest stop.

“Sorry about that Smudge. Let’s take a little break.”

Jim navigated the Jeep off M-28 and up the access road to an old rest stop. The pavement was crumbled and grown through with vegetation but the area did show signs of infrequent use. After parking the Jeep, Jim put some snacks and water in a small knapsack and he and Smudge got out and explored what was left in the area.

The sidewalks were crumbling concrete paths and only a foundation remained of a building that once housed restrooms, an information center, and a restaurant. Tourism in Michigan's upper peninsula had long since ended. Only the most adventurous travelers strayed very far from major electric interstate corridors, and there wasn't one running the east-west breadth of the U.P. Lacking an easy connection to more populated areas, the upper peninsula had become depopulated.

"Come on, Smudge," Jim called, as he made his way along a path that lead to a trailhead into the woods. They meandered on the trail through a forested area for half mile or so before coming to a river at the top of a small waterfall. Around the bottom of the waterfall there was a small clearing and a beach of river stones, where Jim sat down with his back against a boulder and rifled through the knapsack for a water bottle. Smudge plodded over to the riverbank and then back to the trail, sniffing and looking around, before settling in at Jim's side. Lulled the sound of the waterfall and the low sunshine that had broken through the clouds, Jim closed his eyes and dozed off. But before long he was awakened by Smudge's low growl.

Standing at the top of the waterfall were a hiker and a dog. The two disappeared behind the edge of the cliff over which the water tumbled and a short time later Jim heard footsteps on the trail behind the clearing. Smudge cautiously walked toward the trail and was soon snoot to snoot with the hiker's dog, a shaggy Border Collie mix. The collie sniffed Smudge then showed no further interest. Jim called "Smudge, leave it," and Smudge ambled back.

"Is your Collie friendly?" Jim asked the hiker.

"Yeah, he's okay." replied the hiker.

Jim assessed the hiker and momentarily regretted leaving the Jeep unattended in the decayed parking area. He also thought that maybe he should have brought the gun. The hiker carried the burden of a full

backpack and had obviously been out for a while. Most of the people that hiked around the upper peninsula were okay, but it only takes one crazy to make for a bad day.

Jim went on with an open-ended statement, to see how the man would reply: "Looks like you've been out for a while."

"A few days. Rained a lot, which wasn't too nice. But we're surviving." After a pause the hiker continued "Is that your Jeep in the parking lot?"

"Yeah, the black one?" Jim asked. It was a dumb followup question—how many old Jeeps were there in the area? But it's all that came to mind in the moment.

"That's quite a vehicle. 2002?" the hiker asked.

"2000. It was my old man's. Kept it up over the years."

There was an awkward pause until the hiker asked "Where you headed?"

"Smudge and I, we're just out on the road for a while, heading to lower Michigan first. How about you?"

The hiker didn't answer Jim's question. Instead he said in a way that was both a question and a statement of fact: "You know the bridge is closed." And as if to prove his point, the hiker pulled his comdev from his pocket and thumbed to a public-safety post. He turned the device so Jim could see the screen saying "Didn't you see this on your comdev?"

"No, I hadn't seen that. Thought it was open on Sunday mornings for legacy vehicles," Jim replied.

"Yeah it usually is, but I guess they found more corrosion in some of the cables or something, so shut they shut it down a couple days ago," the hiker said. "You'll have to put your Jeep on a transport through the tunnel, I guess."

"We'll work something out," Jim said.

"Well we're going to keep moving. There's a spot I like to camp at, but it's a good hour away yet. The days are getting pretty short."

"Yeah, alright. Thanks for the heads up about the bridge."

The hiker started down the trail and his dog obediently tagged along. Smudge watched them walk away then turned to Jim as if wondering what to do. "Come on, Smudge, let's get going," Jim said, starting to walk back on the trail.

Jim found the Jeep as he left it and he and Smudge drove on for another hour or so until it started to get dark. Jim had thought he would camp for the night outside of St. Ignace so he could make the bridge drive the next morning, Sunday. But if what the hiker had told him was true, that the bridge was closed, he'd have to find another way across the straits. Putting his Jeep on a transport would normally be the way to go, but it wasn't possible with cash and without a comdev. The other way to get the Jeep across the straits was by ferry boat. A number of ferry operators made stops in St. Ignace, a legacy of the tourism days of long ago. It was possible that one might accept cash in exchange for transport to the lower peninsula, but that would be pretty unusual. He would have to ask around.

Closer to town and to the corridor the roads became nicer and cars passed more frequently. The St. Ignace city limits were clearly demarcated by bright lights and a dense distribution of restaurants, hotels, and charging stations. Instead of proceeding directly into the city, however, Jim followed roads that took him south toward the water and then southeast along the shoreline. Here and there along the road, which was lined with bright electric billboards advertising local attractions and ferry company schedules and rates, Jim caught glimpses

of the Mackinac Bridge towers rising over the treetops. One traffic information sign announced 'Mackinac bridge closed seek alternate route.'

Just on the outskirts of town Jim turned the Jeep into the parking lot of a small pub. The gravel parking area and lack of charging stations gave the pub the look of a local establishment, rather than that of a tourist-serving place. "Maybe someone in here knows something... you're going to have to stay in the car, Smudge. Keep an eye on things; I'll be back in a bit," Jim said as he opened the door and got out of the Jeep.

A few heads turned his way when Jim walked into the pub and took a seat at the end of the bar. He gestured to get the bartender's attention and surveyed the place while he waited. The place was not brightly lit. A few patrons sat at tables and at the other end of the bar, talking and drinking. Old beer mirrors and pictures of classic cars hung on the time-darkened knotty pine walls, and it took Jim a little while to realize that there were no screens streaming sports, news, and advertisements such as had become the norm just about everywhere.

The bartender walked his way and said "What can I get you?"

"I'll just have a Bud," Jim replied.

When the bartender came back with Jim's beer. Jim thanked him and added as smalltalk "The bridge is closed again, huh?"

"That's what they say," the bartender said in a slow drawl, "are you coming or going?"

"Going, I guess, headed south," Jim said, hoping the bartender would continue the smalltalk, which Jim could steer toward the question of a way across the straits. But the bartender walked away.

After Jim finished his beer the bartender walked back and asked "Get you another?"

"No thanks," Jim relied, "my dog is waiting in the car." The bartender picked up Jim's empty beer glass and started to walk away again but Jim called him back. "You know, there is something... I'm looking for a way across the straits." The bartender looked back at Jim quizzically so he added "I'm driving an old Jeep."

"Why don't you just take a transport through the tunnel?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah the thing is my comdev isn't working," Jim answered, "all I have is cash."

At that, the bartender leaned in a bit and said "That's a problem."

"I know. I was thinking I might be able to find a ferry," Jim said.

"Well the mainliners won't take you," noted the bartender. And after a pause, which had Jim thinking the conversation was again at a dead end, the bartender said "There's a guy in Gros Cap who might take you."

Without hesitation Jim asked "Who's that?"

"His name is Fred. He's got a small boat that he runs back and forth, not on any kind of schedule though. If you head toward Gros Cap on Route 2 you'll see a small sign for Fred's Ferry just this side of town. Tell him Marcus sent you."

"Thanks Marcus," Jim said. "I like your place here. No screens."

"Yeah, it keeps the riffraff away," Marcus said with a grin.

"Thanks again. We'll see you next time," Jim said as he stood up and pushed his barstool back in place.

Back in the Jeep, Jim motored west on M-2 until he saw the small painted-plywood sign for Fred's Ferry. He turned left and followed a one-lane gravel road down to the water and found a somewhat dilapidated marina where a number of small boats were docked. Over at the marina's far end, by the lift and the maintenance building, was a ferry boat that seemed just big enough to carry a few passengers and maybe half a dozen cars.

Bright white lights illuminated the deck of the ferry where a man was working, tiding power cords and dock lines it seemed. Jim drove slowly across the gravel parking lot toward the boat; the crunching of the Jeep's tires and the sound of the Jeep's motor got the man's attention. He stood still and watched as Jim parked the Jeep and got out. Smudge jumped out of the driver's side door too and walked at Jim's side.

After Jim had taken a few steps toward the man on the ferry the man called out in a not so friendly tone "Can I help you?"

Jim waited until he was a little closer before saying "Are you Fred?"

"Yeah I'm Fred," the man replied. "The mainline ferries are a bit further down the road, you know," he continued, still standing motionless on the ferry deck eyeing Jim and Smudge.

"I know," Jim said, as he and Smudge reached the water's edge by the ferry. "I was down at Marcus' bar and he said you might be able to help me."

"How's that?" the man replied, with some skepticism in his voice.

Fred seemed like a straight-to-the-point kind of guy so Jim replied without beating round the bush: "I'm looking for a way across the straits, for me and my Jeep, and for Smudge here. I have cash, that's it."

Fred didn't reply right away. Instead he went back about his work with the cords and ropes. Jim stood and watched. After a while, without looking up from his work, Fred said "I can take you. We can't go now though. I've run the boat back and forth a couple times and it needs to charge. We can go tomorrow morning, first thing. Two hundred fifty dollars."

"Alright, sounds good to me," Jim said. "Can I stay here in my Jeep overnight?"

"Yeah, that's alright. Park over in the back of the lot. You can use the bathrooms in the small building there if you like. The code is 2434. I'll need you to pay me now, though."

After Jim had given Fred the cash and parked the Jeep, Jim reconstituted a dehydrated dinner packet and then he and Smudge went for a walk around the marina. Jim decided to sleep in the Jeep instead of pulling out all the camping gear. He reclined the seat, pulled a blanket over himself, and switched on a radio. Although nearly all entertainment was nowadays streamed over the Net, a few radio stations still worked the AM broadcast band. On this night, KYW from Philadelphia came in well and Jim listened to the news and political talk until he dozed off.

The last thing Jim remembered hearing was a segment from the top-of-the-hour news: "The House of Representatives today passed along party lines legislation updating Federal comdev requirements. The Security through Continuous Positive Identification Bill updates Federal comdev mandates to require citizens to carry their personal communication, commerce, and identification device at all times when away from their place residence. Proponents of the legislation claim this mandate will increase security nearly everywhere and further reduce crime. But privacy and civil liberty groups vehemently oppose the legislation, calling it the Government's final assault on the vestiges of personal privacy. It is unclear if the bill will pass the Senate, but if it does, President Steinhouser has indicated she will sign it."