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## Lightning Flowers

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LIGHTNING FLOWERS

by

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B.A. University of West Florida, 2004

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
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## ABSTRACT

*Lightning Flowers* traces the psychological collapse of Waylan Dranger, an East Texas construction worker / folk artist. Waylan suffers from hallucinatory encounters with Reeve, his missing brother. Reeve often blames Waylan for his disappearance and implied death. Waylan also worries that Sam, his live-in girlfriend, will leave him before he can resolve his own increasingly erratic behavior.

Largely, *Lightning Flowers* is preoccupied with the consequences of nostalgic thinking. Among others, the novel grapples with the following questions: What defines contemporary notions of “brotherhood”? To what extent does one’s survival necessitate self-delusion? How do social stigmas inform our experience of mental illness?

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## CHAPTER 1

Waylan Dranger was thinking of his probably-dead brother Reeve as he watched the newly-sprung Jefferson Kray stalk around the den of his house. Waylan considered those names: Waylan and Reeve. Back in the early eighties, their parents had decided these were good, unique-sounding American names befitting two—they'd felt sure about this—very exceptional and brilliant children. Waylan learned to sing on pitch before he ever enunciated individual words, and they figured Reeve a genius toddler because he was always digging screwdrivers out of his father's utility drawers and jamming them into broken appliances. Now twenty-five, Waylan decided that the names, especially when paired, sounded a lot like the title of a bottom-rung country-western act, except that the Reeve half of the act was probably dead. Waylan had neglected to warn him about incoming squally weather one Friday evening some five years past, and as a result, Reeve had likely been cooked by lightning or folded between waves or sent up the briny coils of a waterspout.

Waylan was pretty sure he could remedy most of his problems if only Jefferson would play Reeve's part. He just needed Reeve back for a little while, didn't matter that it was only a surrogate version. Then maybe he wouldn't need the unpronounceable medication, wouldn't be so distant around Sam, wouldn't get so congested with bad thoughts. Though he looked like a philosopher on the lam, Jefferson claimed he was an up-and-coming actor. That was perfect. Jefferson would be Waylan's nicotine patch—a surrogate brother who'd suffice until Waylan was strong enough that he didn't even need that. The next few days would serve as a sort of extended interview. If Jefferson could just pull off a convincing version of Reeve, then maybe Waylan could start clearing his head of what felt like a hot mist on the verge of combustion. These days he didn't even like to go near candles.

As Jefferson tilted a picture from the wall, Waylan wished like hell that the guy would improvise a convincing story about what had happened the day it was taken. In the shot, Reeve sat on a flight of brick steps, his hands loading orange segments into a china bowl. Wasn't anyone's birthday, and it wasn't some holiday. The picture had been snapped on an ordinary spring day, and maybe that was why it was one of Waylan's favorites. His younger brother might not have noticed whichever one of their parents had held the camera that afternoon, or he might have pretended that he hadn't. Reeve was looking at someone beyond the right-hand side of the frame, where Waylan had been sitting, eating his own bowl of oranges. Or was it peaches? Jefferson brought his face close to the image, his eyes straining, thin lips flagging. This was the crucial moment. Jefferson would either say he remembered that day, proving he was worth his salt as an actor and a potential Reeve, or he'd run aground, in which case Waylan would send him packing.

"Bet he looks familiar," Waylan said, grinning so hard now that his teeth might split, such was his need for Jefferson to succeed, to say something convincing.

"I'm on the cusp of a breakthrough," Jefferson said.

He brought a dramatic fist to his brow and let the frame clatter face-down against a decorative platter of whorled seashells. At length he shook his head and moved on to the den's more compelling artifacts, a keen-eyed prospector staking new claims, hearing new secrets. He opened cigar boxes and drawers and assayed their contents with bowled palms. Waylan liked the prospector vibe. This guy was on the right frequency, the whole circling-back-into-history look. Waylan could sympathize, he who felt he lived just a beat behind the moment, stuck on satellite delay. As a test, Waylan tried clearing his throat, but even this gesture lagged an instant behind,

the sound reaching his ears well after his throat had stopped rattling. When people talked about living in the moment, what moment did they mean?

It was only March, and already the air conditioner poured gouts of chilled air down the backs of their necks. Jefferson wore threadworn jeans, the pockets dark with grease, his shoulders walled up inside of a half-digested cotton button-up so old the shirttail trailed in gauzy shreds. Waylan had found Jefferson walking along the highway, and he'd reminded Waylan so much of Reeve that he had no choice but to pull over and pick him up. Waylan bought them each a turkey sandwich from the truck stop's frosty glass vault, and they gulped down the gluey triangles with long swallows of orange juice as they rode down the highway, a mild East Texas sun burning with the restrained intensity of something that didn't mind waiting another month or so to melt you down.

Now Waylan could see more of Reeve in Jefferson as he stood there in Waylan's living room, scratching under his arms. Same trashy scowl, same geometric cheekbones. Awnings, those brows of his, blocking the lamplight before it could really get to his eyes. A bit taller than he'd have expected Reeve to grow, but close enough that he could sort of *play* Reeve.

Balthazar, Waylan's old hound dog, located an irresistible scent bound up in Jefferson's socks. The dog kept nosing him until Jefferson got alarmed and spun around, like he was worried Balthazar was trying to give him a hot-foot. Odd guy. Reminded Waylan of a wind-up toy whose winder had been torqued beyond its limit and then released. Waylan felt a little embarrassed, realizing now that the house he shared with Sam had so little to offer in the way of entertainment. They owned three old televisions, but no cable service. The smallest of the three screens hung over the kitchen table, where some nights it picked up the news channels. They kept another on the dresser in the bedroom. The third screen stayed in the den, along with a

VCR, a few of Sam's nature documentaries, Waylan's *Twin Peaks* collection, a round of campy Westerns, and two Herzog films. Waylan and Sam weren't Luddites, they were just frugal. They owned a computer, but no internet. They had cell phones, but opted for a piecemeal billing system. Every time they sent a message or made a call it added a few cents to the bill, which meant their phones didn't get used much.

On the far wall, a wide map of the states shivered in the breeze of an oscillating fan that wagged its head in general disapproval of Waylan and his guest. Jefferson trawled his finger across the broken coastline and its barrier islands, but Waylan would bet his own hands that Jefferson was scanning for Galveston Island, when in fact Waylan's house was closer to Gaston Island. A common mistake. Rand McNally had been turning out flawed maps for years, with the islands mislabeled. The upshot was that Gaston and its eponymous island were thriving on the business of misdirected tourists who were just sure that they were patronizing Galveston's beaches. Rumor had it that the receptionists of all the local beach motels were actually trained to mispronounce the name, adding a slurred syllable to "Gaston" in an effort to keep folks misinformed.

Jefferson's reconnoiter ended at a shelf covered with old glass bottles labeled by makers long defunct. Several were badly cracked, and all were dulled and mineral-flecked. A dried viscera of dust and cobwebs clung to their inner surfaces. Jefferson scowled at the bottles, like he couldn't figure out what they were for.

Better that Jefferson didn't care about the bottles. Why should he? Best path between two points was never the straight line, never the direct course. People, ideas, the weather—all of it moved in spirals and sub-spirals, turning endless circles on the skin of a planet that circled a star tacked to the dime-thin edge of a galaxy that turned its own wobbly course. You had to spin from

Point A to Point B, and Jefferson was a spinner. Good on him. People forgot that the universe scattered itself likewise, vicious slashes of white-hot star stuff flung like chicken feed. Full-on terrifying, to *feel* the motion of the stars and planets, the dizzy calamity of space. And Waylan felt that often, could even, on certain cloudless nights, feel all one thousand lunatic miles per hour of the world's turning. A well-accustomed visitor to that kind of vertigo. Fine, then. Let Jefferson falter there among the bottles and what-not. He'd figure it out eventually. He'd spiral in with everything else.

But the guy definitely needed to settle down, and since he didn't look like the sort who'd turn down a drink, Waylan decanted the remainder of a dusty whiskey bottle—Waylan himself not being the iron-livered sort—into a thick-walled glass. As they closed around the drink, Jefferson's trembling fingers grew still. They stood for a moment, Waylan and his chewed-looking guest, who drank with a sound like bathwater sucked down a broken pipe. Jefferson's lips curled and he let loose a deep belch. But why'd he seem so confused, like he was waiting for someone to feed him a line to say? Waylan hated the uncertainty of it. Could the guy act or couldn't he?

“Smart-looking,” Jefferson said, rambling over to the roulette wheel. He rubbed the polished woodwork and gave it a spin, blurred pinwheel of black and red numbers, the bearings ticking. “But roulette's a fool's game,” he said, taking a drink. “We used to hit the tables together, right? That's got to be where I know you from.”

Wrong again. Maybe this was a bad idea. Jefferson must've sensed as much. He sighed and—finally!—settled into the nearest recliner. Jefferson frowned at the den's gallery of oddities: driftwood stobs fashioned into coffee tables and baskets, blank green and blue bottles

fitted with lamps and rearranged as light fixtures, old painted billboards hawking soda or cigarettes or sideshow oddities. A truckless wagon sat on a drop cloth stippled with red paint.

“Certainly got your share of outlandish junk here,” Jefferson said. “You some kind of folk artist?”

“Sometimes the storms drag this stuff to shore,” Waylan said. “Sam and I work them into furniture or what have you and we sell them off.”

“Reminds me. Went out there to the beach earlier today. Blacktip shark washed ashore with two monster squid riding its back. They were tearing it to bits. Watched all three die there in the sand, if you can believe such a thing.”

“I believe it,” Waylan said. Humboldt squid had been washing up more frequently at Gaston Beach. Something to do with warmer temperatures in the Gulf. He asked Jefferson, “What do you remember?”

“Nothing in detail,” he said, rousing in his seat. “But the fishing, that part feels familiar. And the town. Anyway, we’ve got to be patient. I’ll exhaust myself if I try too hard.”

Jefferson palmed his sun-kissed brow to show Waylan how he might become exhausted. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, the plush red fabric of the chair a misshapen mouth trying to swallow him.

“You know you can’t sleep here,” Waylan said.

“The hell I can’t. I was promised a place to sleep. You going to turn me loose at this hour?” He levered forward in the chair, became partially disgorged.

“Calm down. I just mean you can’t sleep in the middle of the goddamn living room. You’ll sleep in the attic, and just for tonight. We’ll meet up again at lunch time tomorrow.”

“Where?” Already, Jefferson’s ass teetered on the edge of the chair, like he knew he couldn’t afford to get too comfortable.

“Same place I found you.”

“Why can’t you just tell her I’m shacking up here for a while?”

“She wouldn’t understand.”

“But hey, we’re like old friends, right? You should tell me about some of those old times, to help with my memory.”

“Can’t do that. You’ve got the attic tonight, and you’d better stay quiet up there.”

Jefferson came to his feet with a groan and smoothed out the fabric where he’d been sitting. He didn’t say anything, just stood waiting for Waylan to direct him.

#

Low tones rang overhead like far-off detonations as Waylan tried to sleep. Sounded like Jefferson was shifting around up there, unaccustomed to sleeping in attics, or maybe homes in general. If he had any sense at all he’d rummage through the dusty boxes and cobble together some kind of plausible story. Remained to be seen whether or not he could manage that. So much of Reeve’s childhood was still stowed up there: the tee-ball trophies, the toys and fishing gear. Eventually Jefferson would come upon the possessions Reeve had favored later in life: murderous knives, magazines with powerboats on the cover, an air rifle that’d been the bane of so many poor blackbirds and lizards.

Waylan didn’t like the name Jefferson, but then what difference did it really make? Call him Reeve, call him Jefferson. Call him Teddy if that was what he liked. All he had to do was play his part. The world owed that much to Waylan, for taking Reeve away. Jefferson owed it, too, as part and parcel of paying his actorly dues, and as penance for looking so much like

Reeve. Doctors should heal, actors should act—especially in the service of needful others, like Waylan. What could be simpler?

The house spun its silence. Sam was sprawled across the bed, her legs angled toward the south corners of the bed, face lost beneath riptides of curling dark hair. The landscape of her body hilled against the quaking light of the television she'd left on, an electronic wind that sculpted the covers into a wasteland of crests and valleys. Waylan could smell the lavender soap she'd used to wash herself. He'd lied to Jefferson, about Sam not understanding. She might understand. She might even argue that spending time with Jefferson could be therapeutic, cite a few recent case studies for good measure. He still wasn't going to tell her, though. Too embarrassing.

“What time is it?” she whispered.

“It's late,” he said. “Go back to sleep.”

“Heard your voice. Front door closing.”

“It's okay.”

“Phone call?”

“Just a phone call.”

Waylan lay on his back beside her and watched the lights of the distant Ferris wheel turn through the window. He watched three whole revolutions, and as the wheel wound up it gained momentum and circumference. Felt like the house was perched on casters and the Ferris wheel was reeling it in along with the rest of the town, everything sliding toward whatever waited at the end of the wheel's crazy-lit drainhole, which frightened Waylan as much as it fascinated him. He had an image of him and Sam as plum-colored figures shaped from Play-Doh. They were being



cranked through the wheel and extruded through a plastic shower nozzle, their bodies strained to noodles.

Two years since he found the roulette wheel mired in the beach sand and bound up with seaweed, its brass fittings pitted and jacketed in verdigris. The slats had faded and swollen and he couldn't even read the numbers. The wheel might've been tossed from the deck of a Biloxi paddleboat, flipped like a beer tab through a fog of cigar smoke and howled curses and drawn pistols, only to wash up here on this unstoried beach, in this town, this life.

Storms had sailed in continuously the day of the roulette wheel. He'd found Sam waiting beneath the carport, her eyes straining to read the weather, full lips slightly parted as if to taste what passed up there in the sky. She had a compact body with limbs that were always ready to spring. He loved how her nose hung crooked on her face, a dented bell that wrinkled and dipped when she spoke and twitched when she was irritated. *French stock*, she'd once told him, running a hand through that loopy hair, where his fingers always snagged. You could become trapped in hair like hers, its galaxies of closed circles. A good kind of trapped, a suspended feeling, like lying in a cargo net.

"What're you going to do with it?" she'd asked, motioning to the wheel. "Open your own casino? Pit Boss Waylan?"

So crippling, her pragmatism. Sometimes he wondered if she saw the world in right angles. Even the dinner plates she'd bought for their house were cold ugly squares. Like eating off giant saltines. She should've been an engineer—sometimes he wanted to say that.

Waylan sat up in bed, became unmeshed from the purgatory that divides waking and sleeping, the collective drone of an unseen beehive that never quite registers until the sound has already died in your ears. Maybe that was what death would sound like—the ambient thrum of

translucent wings. Waylan lifted his head from the pillow. Jefferson was tossing around in the attic, though for all the noise he might as well be breakdancing up there. The stars didn't care about that, they just kept crowding the dark plane of sky framed in the window, the Ferris wheel turning and turning down by the coast. Sam slept soundly beside him, her legs thrown wide, as if to entice him. So still. Her skin not even skin, but a membrane of construction paper. If he poked hard enough, his finger would go right through. And what was underneath?

Christ, he'd forgotten to take his medicine again, and now he felt the bad ideas gaining altitude in his head like a line of box kites, one stacked inside the other. He often wondered what would actually happen if he just let them fly. What did it mean that Sam was made of paper while Reeve still felt so real? Waylan could sometimes hear his brother's churlish laugh in the salted wind as it drove down the shores of Gaston Beach.

He reached over to the nightstand and uncapped an orange pill bottle. He shook one maroon button loose and downed it with the swallow of stale tea Sam had left in her cup. He wondered how many he'd swallow in his lifetime. Enough to fill a bathtub? A swimming pool? In a magazine, he'd once read that most of the carbon in his body was derived from subsidized corn in its endless permutations. If the corn theory was true, then what effect would all those pills have on this body? Were we talking cellular-level changes? Molecular? He pictured the graceful helices of his DNA embossed with a pharmaceutical trademark.

It was Dr. Jable who'd prescribed the chlorpromazine, which sounded too consonant-heavy to him, like the losing faction of an ancient Greek battle. Once chemically-corrected, Waylan felt like a piece of music whose highs and lows had been attenuated, scooped out. The song of Waylan felt over-processed, favoring the midrange. Neither sour nor sweet—no window-rattling low notes, no shrill treble. Just a flat line, equalized and compressed. But Waylan didn't

want to be that kind of song. He wanted to hear a little distortion, a little feedback here and there. He longed for a bit of dirt in the mix: the bronze bite of cymbals, vocals that wandered just out of key.

He lay back down, wondering how long before Sam left him. When they did make love, which was seldom, it felt compulsive, a minor chore that must be completed and then crossed off a task sheet. The worst was when Sam talked about their sex life like it was another prescription. She liked to read him articles that went into scientific detail about how intercourse promoted good muscle tone, lowered blood pressure, released good chemicals into the brain. She'd used much of the same rhetoric back when they'd tried to go vegetarian. Meanwhile, each year saw an increase in dosage on those rusty little pills, and more and more he was swallowed up by what felt like a cold and greasy fog, like that junk they pumped out at rock concerts. He couldn't always think clearly, and he was sleeping more and more. Some mornings he drove to the job site cradling a full pot of coffee.

All of that could be remedied. He'd find Reeve lying dormant within Jefferson like a peach stone, or he'd find Reeve in someone else. Waylan would make himself holus and bolus again. He pulled Sam closer to his chest and when she didn't stir, he sighed a deep one. He kissed her full on the mouth and watched her nose twitch. After he pulled away, she continued kissing whatever lover frequented her dreams. Waylan was pretty sure it wasn't him.

"You were right about the roulette wheel," he whispered. "Hasn't sold."

"Don't worry," she said, barely even a whisper. "Don't."

Night insects droned through the thin glass. Somewhere coastward, a siren wailed high against the night. From the outer rim of consciousness, he imagined that it was a child who cried out from the midway, having lost his way among cotton candy stalls and sideshow jockeys and

leering perverts. He watched the roulette wheel wash in from the ocean and roll to the boardwalk, where it dilated and fired light and resolved itself into the Ferris wheel. The crying kid sat alone in one of the wheel's gondolas. To ride forever. Waylan would comfort the lost kid. He'd restore the upturned wheel, but instead he fell asleep listening to Sam's breathing, a softly dragged chair.

#

In the morning, a bewildered finch perched on the outer lip of the window frame and pecked a broken cadence on the windowpane, an *S-O-S*, like it wanted to flee the springtime glare. Behind it, the blue gelatin sky slowed down sunrays, made them elongate and gold-sparked. The bird studied Waylan through the glass with its rapid little eye. Never the direct course, he wanted to say. Try the chimney. Spiral in.

Sam had hardly stirred. When he finally cracked open the bedroom door he heard Balthazar scramble up from the kitchen floor, nails ticking against linoleum. Waylan walked to the kitchen on stiff joints and served up the hound's dry chow as quietly as he could. Leaving Balthazar to his bowl, he walked to the hallway and pulled down the attic hatch, the springs moaning as they came taut. Waylan yawned likewise. He ascended the ladder and studied the dusty boxes, holiday ornaments, unfinished artworks. There was no evidence of Jefferson Kray, and Waylan knew he should be glad. Jefferson had done as he was asked, which was good. Although, wouldn't it be more authentically *Reeve* to stick around uninvited-like? Wouldn't it be more like him to disobey? This was going to be difficult. Waylan was having a tough time remembering some of the finer details about his brother—the downhill pitch of his voice, the way he parted his hair. Had he parted his hair? Though he still felt the chilly presence of Reeve's ghost more than he wanted to, the actual Reeve was becoming a dark spot punched into the floor

of Waylan's mind, swallowing up water and light, forcing them into a wobbling vortex that seemed solid enough from a distance, though hollow at the core.

## CHAPTER 2

Sam could hear Waylan bumbling around in the attic, his feet landing with martial regularity. Then, silence, like maybe he was standing, hips cocked, admiring what was left of his brother's possessions. Waylan would be leaving for work soon, and today was her day to pedal the bicycle to work. Today she'd have appointments with: a fire-starter, a biter, two public masturbators, and a cutter. Not one of them older than twelve.

Her job, as she understood it, was to arm them with hope. She thought about the word—*hope*—with its abrupt drop from the long *o* to the truncated *p* at the end. You had to turn your mouth into a halo just to say it, and by the time you made the halo, your mouth was already narrowing down for the short *p* and the silent *e*. That was hope—a spasmodic dilation, a slippery portal that snapped shut just as quickly as it opened.

What was it Sam should hope for? She wouldn't mind having just a little more space to herself, for starters. Beyond that, she wouldn't mind knowing more *people*. A community greater than her officemates at The Center. Maybe she'd enter some more art shows.

And of course she'd like to see Waylan get past Reeve. Sam didn't have any siblings, but she did respect the awesome power that the dead could wield over the living. She'd seen pictures of Reeve, and could imagine him as a ghost—a surly, translucent version of Waylan, whom the ghost kept locked in a full Nelson, Waylan's arms gone horizontal, like he'd been crucified. Waylan guilt-dragged by a spirit that he himself gave breath to, lit dutifully like a votive candle.

Maybe later in the week Sam would invite Bondy to come visit. Bondy had connections over in Austin, and the prospect of an art show would give Waylan something to look forward to—a distraction. They rarely had company over, Waylan having few friends beyond the

construction crewmen he knew from work. Many of them were hooked on painkillers or worse, with hands rough as pig iron and eyes that lingered on Sam's chest.

Sam gathered herself up from the bed and stepped into the bathroom. Balthazar followed her in. She sat peeing and kneading the dog's ears, which were warm and fatty, and thick as paddles. Their morning ritual. Balthazar's eyes kept fluttering shut, and he kept backing up, like it almost felt too good, and he'd rather not allow himself to get spoiled beyond a certain threshold. She bent down and kissed the dry part of his snout and he snuffled with gratitude, though the baggy skin made his face mournful. He'd always reminded her a little of Waylan that way.

The shelves in the bathroom were loaded up with sea glass and shells and old bottles she and Waylan had salvaged from the beach. On the wall opposite the toilet, Waylan had hung up a blown-up image—an etched series of monochromic dust devils scouring the desert, riders on horseback and camelback fleeing their paths. This print was the one piece of bathroom décor that Waylan had ever insisted on. He'd found the image in an outdated library book that detailed catastrophic weather. For a full day he pored over the images before heading out to the copy shop to have it enlarged, and now here it was, framed and hanging on the wall, clashing with the seashell shower curtain hooks and the pink porcelain sink, which was also crimped like a seashell. Seashells, more seashells, and then malevolent windstorms. Didn't make sense to her. Real-life dust devils swept over the wasted hardpan all summer long, and most of them weren't strong enough to upset a bird's nest, much less lift a grown person.

The print probably belonged to an era when superstition still swung its goonish knuckles into logic's thin paunch, when whirlwinds carried either stentorian directives from God or the nectared lisp of devils. Had any of that changed? Among dozens of other innovations, plenty of

her patients at The Center still distrusted vaccinations, antipsychotics, even prophylactics. Some of them tried to pray away their maladies, addressing their respective deities with all the confidence of a bank patrons shuttling funds through pneumatic tubes. She'd be the first to admit that Western medicine had its limits, but so did echinacea or ayurvedic breathing exercises or rosaries. Waylan's framed whirlwinds confessed a certain hard-spun truth about the Old West: people wanted to believe that forces from a loftier order than meteorology steered the wind and poured the rivers. She might even believe that, too, some days.

The image must've spoken to Waylan from a different register. Maybe he'd listened to those silent eddies and heard the dusty echo of Reeve's voice. Waylan had told her the story a thousand times: Reeve had planned to go fishing one Saturday in an unseasonably warm October, and he'd asked Waylan to check the weather report the night before. *Twin Peaks* had been running in syndication, and Waylan forgot to switch over to the report. Later that night, when Reeve asked, Waylan lied and told him there'd be clear skies—a likely story. The following morning, Reeve went fishing as usual, but around noon the sky turned the color of soy sauce and stormed to end the world. Reeve never made it back.

Sam stood and hauled up her panties. To live in a house where the bathrooms weren't plagued by whirlwinds—that would be something. As she flushed the toilet, Balthazar trotted back to the bedroom, uneasy with the sound of all that moving water. The windstorms seemed to be moving very slowly over the etched desert, advancing at a leftward slant. Kind of hypnotizing.

She forced herself to turn away and walk into the bedroom, wondering if maybe asking people to forgive themselves was a bit like asking Balthazar to drink his water out of a champagne flute. Over the years, she'd helped rehabilitate her share of fire-starters and brick-



throwers and lip-splitters, but forgiveness never came in confident fashion. Their guilt moved like Gaston's rainstorms. Some bouts were abrupt and violent, passing quickly, but for some, the guilt settled in—steady, methodical, no breaks in the clouds.

Waylan was a drizzler.

### CHAPTER 3

Waylan would drive to the beach before work and see if anything of value had washed up. Their house was only a couple of miles north of the coast, and they got a good dose of the salt-laced humidity. Dew beads spread over its metal roof, the raised drops forming unreadable constellations. Fog patches still clung about the high grass of an abandoned lot next door, and already the heat welled up under the heels of his shoes, like its source was the ground itself and not the fogged aster of a sun. He flung open the console and began rummaging for a handkerchief he could use to clear the dew. Folded and tucked among the loose coins, ballpoint pens and chewing gum waited a doctor's note with the date of Waylan's next appointment scrawled in left-leaning ink. Always his heart sank to see these. Any afternoon now the secretary would call for confirmation. Of what?—that he was still deranged?

Waylan brushed aside the appointment slip. Underneath was a picture of Sam he'd taken at the beach. Together they'd dug a series of trenches that coursed from the shore to a deep tidepool. In the picture Sam doubled over, carving at the sand with a plastic trowel. She had time to turn her head just enough to see him aiming the camera at her upturned backside. The snapshot was taken a few summers ago, just before Dr. Jable decided something was wrong with him, that his claims that Reeve still visited were not a healthy sign.

How to explain that it wasn't him, but Reeve who initiated their visits? He knew early on that she wouldn't want to hear about that. Plus, she appeared so horribly disappointed to hear the progress of his mental ruin, often covering her mouth with a gloved hand.

Just a few months after Reeve's disappearance, he'd felt a kind of poison pooling at the front of his skull, a crude and watery sentience taking shape. Or maybe it had always been there in component form, and only then had the elements begun assembling into a conscious being.

Waylan could feel it toiling away with the patience of a woodworm, grating along, fattening itself on the delicate ridges of his brain. The worm bored channels and left them slicked with its waste. He felt the worm's progress sometimes, a deep cerebral itch, but how would you explain that to a doctor? This was a creature better left unaddressed, else they'd really start zapping him with medication, maybe put him back on the dreaded clozapine, which would have him sleeping even longer hours and accumulating an extra pound of ass fat each week. Waylan had decided Sam was better off not knowing about the worm, let alone Reeve's visits. She knew about the pills and the appointments with Dr. Jable, and that was enough.

Waylan drove south, toward the Gulf, the fog breaking into curds, vegetation clearing to reveal sandy plots stitched with beach grasses and pink-walled beach cottages. He parked at the boardwalk, where the rides and gaming booths were still vacant and unlit. He stepped past the boardwalk on a path that rambled between the dunes. Glossy, green-banded waves abraded the coastline, which was dotted with many of the dead squid Jefferson had mentioned. Waylan walked westward down the coastline. Gulls sang overhead. Warm water sloshed past his ankles. Breaking waves breathed that final sigh before sleep.

He was studying a feather-scrape of high cirrus clouds, trying to imagine what those fine ice crystals would look like up close, when he nearly stepped on the dead sea turtle, its peeled skull bobbing at his feet while its tail dragged in the surf. He pinched his nose at the stench of spoiled fish and ammonia. Black flies massed at its slack mouth. Rags of gray flesh formed a loose veil for the exposed skull, its bony sutures like fault lines in drying mud. Most of the flesh had paled and sloughed away, and even as he watched, the gray tissue dissolved like papier-mâché in the wave action. Foul musculature spanned like buttressing beneath the shell, its scutes already sunbleached at the edges. Blue crabs clambered away with as much meat as they could

carry in their serrate claws. Little ghouls wasted no time, every funeral a watery feast. Waylan figured the turtle deserved better, and though he would've liked to push it back out to sea, he didn't really feel up to touching it.

He sat down in the sand where the waves wouldn't reach. The turtle lay at his feet, water lapping at the bottom half of its body. The turtle's problem was that it couldn't decide if it wanted to die by land or by sea. Waylan and the turtle had that particular question in common: *By land or by sea?*

"Shoo," someone called, wandering down to the shore. "Now that's a stink."

There was the Squid Man, one of the self-proclaimed freaks from Azar's on the boardwalk. The gangly fellow was adorned from head to foot in purple tattoos. His limbs served as maypoles for a cast of lanky goblins, red-eyed horses, gargoyles. He grinned over the turtle, revealing pointed teeth he must've filed himself. Decorative manacles of wrought iron fettered his wrists, and as he studied the turtle he jingled the cuffs with his fingers. Attending this purple waif were a dwarfish fellow who puffed away at a wooden pipe and Azar's three-armed Octopus Woman, who had left the third arm elsewhere and appeared kind of unremarkable without it.

"Smells like Branson," she said, blond hair tossing in the breeze.

"Lordy, that is one dead critter," the Squid Man said.

"That'll do," the dwarf told him, removing his pipe with a flourish. "Either advance the conversation or try not to say anything at all."

"Sure, but just look at it," the Squid Man said, needle-grinning at the other two, who toed the loose sand. The three of them shifted on their feet, discomfited, maybe, in the absence of crowds and ballyhoo, shied by the muted slush of breaking waves.

Later, Myles Crow wandered down and sat apart from the rest, head bowed between his knees. He wasn't one of Azar's freaks, but a very furtive and deviant kid who haunted the boardwalk. Waylan didn't like Myles, even carried a nagging suspicion that Reeve's disappearance was in some way connected to the boy, who was rumored to control the weather. For the time being, though, all of the freaks stood there like they were linked together with monofilament.

Waylan wished they'd all just go away and let him attend to the turtle's last rites. He sat watching the animal for a long time, until long after the carnies had shambled back to the arcade. The animal's flippers dipped just shy of the surf, like it might just startle awake and struggle for higher ground. Maybe it'd been hatched on this very beach. This turtle must've seen so much of the world. How many oceans had it crossed before ending up here?

*By land or by sea?*

Blue-chromed flies ran laps around the turtle's vacant eye sockets. Waylan wondered what it was that willed things like the turtle and the roulette wheel to shore. He didn't figure there was much of a structure to the way the world unfolded, but sometimes it was hard to be sure. A single wave could carry ashore the precise object he hadn't known he needed for one of his art projects—a Victorian coat-tree, or an old Spanish wine bottle, or a roulette wheel. Or the next Camille or Katrina could blow through and rinse away the coastline. As the waves wore on, the turtle nodded, a skull that contained the sea and its arrogant riddles.

#

Waylan drove north to the construction site, his stomach twisting into painful kinks. Reeve could still be out there in the Gulf, a puzzle of bones lying on the seafloor. Maybe the crabs were still carrying him off. If only it were so easy, to steal Reeve from their chitinous

mouths a fiber at a time, polish every bone and stitch him back together like all the other items he rescued.

Further north, the landscape began drying out. Slash pines needled the east side of the highway. On the west side, the creek's pewter surface flashed between scrub growth. West of the creek, an arid brown region where only the humblest of life could cling, green succulents and silvery starbursts of cholla. This was a false desert—a former cotton plantation that once stretched nearly to the northern horizon when Waylan and Reeve were children. The ground had been overworked, and the land was fallow now. Rains had funneled the coffee-colored topsoil into the creek, which freighted it to the sound, leaving behind an unyielding, skillet-hard crust of dirt where small cacti, hardy grasses, and venomous critters vied for purchase. Hippies liked to camp out there, too, or psychedelic enthusiasts in need of open spaces.

Sometimes Waylan could feel something moving deep in the ground, the chafing of stony plates, heavy slabs coming unpaired. The West was spreading its fingers toward the Atlantic, draining the nutritive sap of wetter, more fertile regions.

When he arrived at the construction site, the remaining fog had cleared out and a molten sun dribbled brimstone over the treeline with teenage glee. An excavator stood in the shade of mossy oaks and magnolias, its heavy maws poised over the tilled earth. Sulking fairytale monster, epicurean of soily matter. He loved that machine. The creek stood just a short hop into the west, and to the north, where the land was still arable, the irrigated fields were rowed with iron cotton stalks and satin cornrows that flashed silver and green in the breeze. The ground before him lay pitted, like it'd been rolled by an enormous bootspur. Dirt mounded in rusty heaps, feeding traces of iron into the breeze. The archaeology department had phoned Prescott over the weekend and told him they had cause to suspect something was buried in the earth. The

anticipation left Waylan light-headed. Sometimes he imagined that by digging up old bottles and bricks, he could wake some part of that sleeping past. So many conversations must've occurred between sips from those bottles, if only he had ears to hear it. How many hooves and wagon wheels might've rattled and clacked over those bricks he pulled up? Sure, he'd unearthed enough animal bones to know that the resurrection business had its limits, but sometimes he still wondered about the West as it had been before cars and silicon chips.

The perforated earth and the crude machinery were not what Waylan loved about his job. What he enjoyed was the act of construction itself, the idea. He could give structure to oblivion, shaping so much slag into structures that would probably outlive him. Waylan could build legacies—a bridge, a road, or in his present and unfortunate case, another hamburger stand. Why? Because his boss, Nels Prescott, was the kind of man who had to die knowing—and more importantly, having others know—that he owned a restaurant. That was the rumor anyway, delivered to Waylan by way of Sam, who heard it from her friend Bondy, who added a dubious modifier: this was to be a *pirate-themed* restaurant.

There was even a kind of logic in Prescott's not telling Waylan. He probably knew that Waylan was only interested in the construction of meaningful, non-pirate projects. One of Waylan's fantasies was that his boss would become so engrossed in the burger industry that he'd give Waylan more reign over the construction side of the business. Building new structures, that was what Waylan liked. To hell with making pirate sandwiches. Did pirates even eat sandwiches?

He found Owen stretched lengthwise on the crusted tread of the excavator. A rosy kid, head bound up in a paisley bandana. He was using a broken rubber band to snap orbiting flies, an easy smile on his young and pimpled face. Long-boned, enthusiastic, but no sturdier than an

inflatable pool toy. Still, Waylan liked Owen, who'd come from the big northeast. Lately Waylan had been itching to move to a big city, where he might not dwell on Reeve so much. Didn't matter which city, just so long as its name—its *correct* name—appeared on maps.

“And who delivered your sorry ass today?” Waylan said.

“Jerome came in from Newark. Found himself a refinery job.” Owen cut his eyes over Waylan's shoulder like this news scarcely interested him.

“So Jerome's back.”

Owen snapped the rubber band and a fly dropped onto the treads belly-up, legs beating.

“They been fighting?” Waylan said.

“Not yet.”

“Hm.” Waylan prized a clay ingot from the rusted tread, avoiding the eyes of the whelp stretched beneath him. “Well how'd your movie date go?”

“Like a turd in a punchbowl,” Owen said, scanning for killable targets. “I'll take the girls back home over these country-fried types.”

“By God if you don't talk about New Jersey more than any man who walked. You'll never make it back there riding those treads. Now get up.”

Owen took to his feet with measured reluctance, like it took some real effort to get those long bones of his moving.

“Mostly I just miss walking to the deli for a sandwich,” Owen said.

“You can still do that here.”

Owen raised an eyebrow at Waylan and shook his head.

“Did they have trains up there where you lived?” Waylan said.

“Well, you've got surface trains running to Philly and New York.”



“Always wanted to ride those subway trains like you see in New York. Thought it’d feel sort of like tunneling through the earth. You’d know you were in a legitimate city.”

“Legitimate city? One time on the Amtrak this guy in a top hat tried to stick his tongue in my ear.”

“That sort of thing could never happen here,” Waylan said, surprised at his own rueful tone.

Owen liquidated another fly and stuffed the rubber band in his pocket. “Why can’t we just level the ground out and lay the foundation already?” he said, motioning toward the construction side.

“Prescott says we have to spot-check around the lot before we go any further. Orders from the archaeology people.”

“What is it they expect us to find?”

“Can’t say for sure, but I know an archaeologist wouldn’t get this jumpy over just any old dirt lot.” He gestured toward the excavator. “You grease this machine yet?”

Owen began scratching the back of his neck.

“Miracle is that any of this junk still runs,” Waylan said.

“Not my fault. Mr. Prescott always forgets. Makes me wonder who he paid off to get that degree. You’re about the only person I’ve met down here who’s not completely ass-headed.”

“Grease those joints. One day you might land a job with a legitimate outfit.”

“Admit it, Waylan.”

He’d never admit that he enjoyed this kind of praise. Waylan had never gone to college, and it always gave him a little thrill to outwit the folks who carried more formal pedigrees. Whatever people were learning up in their ivory towers, basic sense wasn’t a top priority. Sure,

Sam was an exception, but sometimes even her talk got a bit mighty when it came to the medicines and the diagnoses.

They toiled in the heat of rumbling machinery, Waylan seated in the excavator's cab, Owen standing in the turned soil, his lank limbs made lankier by a mere shovel. Owen watched as Waylan withdrew layers of clay and shale and then darker, fouler layers that pulled like tar and smelled of rot. Under his control, the machine came to life with an unlikely elegance, its iron bucket spooning earth precisely, efficiently. Waylan liked feeling that the chaotic landscape around him could be parsed into simple buckets of dirt. He liked how the construction lot's problems could be dealt with one scoop at a time. He dug at the lot's perimeter and then circled inward, narrowing the area, confining it. Soon the ground lay gopher-holed, and still no sign of whatever was supposed to be buried. Waylan leaned out through the cab to watch Owen work.

"Not hide nor hair so far," he said. "Any ideas?"

Owen stepped over and craned his head through a port near Waylan's feet. "We're digging way out in the middle of a field, right? If I was burying something by hand I'd bury it close to the trees. Have some shade while I worked. You know, closer to the stream."

"Owen Fairchild: goddamn boy genius of New Jersey. That's good. We just have to keep an eye on the water table."

By noon, it had grown warm enough to make him uncomfortable, the air fixed with diesel fumes and machine grease and the fecund smell of his own sweat. Insects came awake in the warm soil and took wing. Dragonflies patrolled the creek, their ferrous green bodies weightless somehow, and as the sun scaled higher, other ground-dwelling insects began their shrill symphonies, daring on the sun's progress.

Waylan cut the engine and signaled to Owen that it was lunch time. The boy was already opening a container of leftover spaghetti when Waylan climbed into the station wagon. He was going to give last night's visitor one more chance before he fired him.

#

Waylan found Jefferson Kray standing at the designated intersection, his hands posted on his hips like he was skeptical of the highway and all who travelled it. He was dressed in Waylan's clothes, high-waisted blue jeans and a short-sleeved button-up that he refused to button.

Gulf Burger was located just a mile or so south, on the sound side, right before you got to the short bridge that formed a startled cat's back between Gaston and the slim barrier island of Gaston Beach, which, from the air, looked no more substantial than a sandbar waiting to be buffed out by the next bad storm. They rode down the highway with windows agape, Waylan at wheel, Jefferson's upper chest bared to the town as it trundled past, eyes pinched like he was reflecting on past injustices, sentences served, indignities suffered.

As Waylan pulled into the Gulf Burger lot, Jefferson started jostling in his seat, eyeing Waylan like he was waiting for any indication that this was all a trick at his expense. He'd probably been fooled before, this guy.

"What's wrong?" Waylan said. "Never seen a hamburger joint?"

Jefferson shook his hair out and regarded his likeness in the mirror. "I know a hamburger place when I see one." He unbuckled his seatbelt and began groping for the door handle. "Aren't we going inside?"

"We don't do that here."

Waylan barked their order into the rusted grill of an intercom. Confirmation arrived in a burst of static. He fussed with the radio tuner as they waited, but each station came in faint and grainy. Jefferson selected a used toothpick from the floor mat and set about cleaning his fingernails. Waylan eyed him, but as long as it didn't end up back in Jefferson's mouth he wasn't going to say anything.

"How'd you sleep?" Waylan said, trying not to follow the toothpick's journey.

"Liked to sweat myself dry up there. At least in the joint you get a little breeze."

"I can take you back there if it suits you so well."

"What'd you dream about last night, Waylan?" Jefferson crossed his arms. "Cause I dreamed I was so thirsty I drank the creek dry. When I came awake I had to just lay there not making any noise and praying for cold mountain streams to course through your Dutch oven of an attic."

Waylan rubbed his jaw. "I dreamed about that Ferris wheel out at the boardwalk. There was this little kid stuck in the seat."

A commotion like loose bricks tumbling down a tin chimney caught their attention and both men turned to a sheet metal slide that curved down from a loft above the kitchen. At the top of the slide, a metal hatch groaned open, releasing a nimbus of steam. For a moment the steam framed a perfect square of light. That light was breached by the dark shape of an angel who became mortal—and downright gawky—as she cleared the steam and accelerated down the slide, rump sliding, feet steering a pair of roller skates, arms cradling a wooden tray piled high with white-wrapped food items.

Fear lit her eyes as she came down, her limbs trembling as she neared the terminus. As soon as the trucks of her skates found the pavement, she sprang upright, tray cradled against her belly like it might save her from falling, but no, it definitely wouldn't save her from falling.

Waylan flinched as she faltered against the gained momentum. For a few yards, she held it together, then her skates whined out from under her and her legs swung up and she came down and down, landing hard on her hip, wrapped burgers raining back to earth, the whole sequence spectacular and perverse.

“Why would she do such a thing?” Jefferson said.

They watched in silence as the fallen carhop struggled to her wheeled feet and rolled toward their car, legs timber-stiff. Waylan recognized her from somewhere. He mouthed the name *Avery*.

“Y'all better not tell my boss,” she said, teeth bared as she nursed her razed elbows. “He says it's going to come out of my pay.” She was looking at Waylan, him still preoccupied with the sequence of her falling—the squared light, the slide, the fall. The images conflated in his mind, so that she never stopped falling. She hit the concrete and it just trampolined beneath her, swallowed her up.

“Hell, there's always figure skating if the burger gig doesn't work out,” Jefferson said. He was talking to the carhop, but he winked at Waylan as he said it.

“Cool it,” Waylan said.

“This stuff's still good anyway,” she said, passing the tray of roadworn sandwiches through the window. Waylan poked through the wrapped items and sighed. Next, she handed him two leaky cups of soda.

“My first proper burger in months and it’s full of gravel,” Jefferson said. “Why not go on and load it with nails and broken glass?”

“Tell your buddy I’d like to see him try to skate down a slide carrying such a pile of cheeseburgers, and wearing a skirt at that,” she told Waylan. “Anyway, I’m much obliged to y’all being so understanding.”

He’d heard a similar combination of those words before, and now he recognized her—Avery Moss, from high school. She didn’t look right wearing an apron and skirt, let alone roller skates. Waylan had always known her to wear capris and tank tops. They’d gone to prom together senior year, back when Reeve was still around. Afterward, Waylan drove her out to the creek and they spread towels over some rocks and had clumsy sex, both of them crying out like the lovers they’d seen in movies. Waylan could barely remember the feeling of his body against hers. He’d spent most of that time scanning the banks for possible voyeurs.

Avery rubbed her hip with one hand and received Waylan’s money with the other, her knees replete with scrapes, some fresh, some scabbed over. Anthologies of humiliation told in scar tissue. Either she didn’t recognize him or wanted to create such an impression. In a different life, she’d just say hello. In a different life, the past he’d survived wouldn’t always make him so damn sad.

“Mustard?” Jefferson asked.

“I’m all out,” she said, shrugging.

A moment later she was gone, the bearings of her skates hissing as they carried her over the asphalt. They ate in silence, Jefferson’s eyes drawn south toward the Gulf. He situated a tub of ketchup in the console’s cupholder and got busy, dipping fried potato logs and bringing them up, still-steaming, to his capacious mouth, which could expand like a drawstring trash bag. It was

mesmerizing. Jefferson either didn't notice or didn't care that he was smearing ketchup all over the cupholder.

“Jesus, why do those taste so good?” Jefferson said.

“They finish them in lamb oil at this place.”

“I guess decent hamburgers aren't enough. No, they've got to load her up with drinks and shit, fire her down a laundry chute like it's Circus Circus.”

“Maybe that's the American Dream. I always wondered what it would look like.”

“Did you see her go down? Brother, my fillings liked to rattle loose when she hit.”

Jefferson paused to uncap a dollhouse whiskey bottle. Waylan was sure he'd seen it among the tiny liquor bottles Sam kept in the pantry. A momentary sniff of its contents, and Jefferson upended the bottle over the open mouth of his soft drink. “I mean what's wrong with the world?”

Waylan wiped his chin. People like Jefferson—they constituted what was wrong with the world. The smeared cupholder was one thing, but was this putz seriously going to sit there in his station wagon eating cheeseburgers bought on Waylan's dime and drinking booze that was obviously stolen from Sam's liquor cabinet? Enough already. Waylan needed more than just a guy who resembled Reeve. He needed someone who could commit wholly to Reeve—an unseeded pod that Waylan could fill with what memories he still had left.

“Hope you enjoyed the sandwich,” Waylan said. “That's your last free meal. This all feels wrong to me.”

Jefferson stopped chewing and glared at his sandwich, like it had insulted him. He sighed and raised his burger, studied it with one eye like a jeweler. “Just help me with the name,” he whispered. “I've been going by Jefferson for years, but hell, I know that's not it.”

“His name’s Reeve. Anyone in town could have told you. You could’ve at least done me the courtesy of finding out, forging some documents. This is too sloppy.”

“I didn’t have any ID when I got arrested, Waylan. So I did time on Jefferson Kray’s name for fear of what I might’ve done in the past to wash up over the border damn near dead with my pockets full of coke and a trench knife strapped to my ankle.”

“You have to remember something.” Waylan raised his eyebrows.

“Doctors told me the problem was I didn’t want to remember. Said I was afraid to face who I used to be.”

“What was it you were afraid of?”

“It was the people, the way they acted.” Jefferson bared his front teeth, like he needed to cool them off. “Everyone was afraid of me. I finally convinced myself I must’ve been some kind of strung-out gang rat. A killer, maybe?”

Waylan couldn’t help rolling his eyes. Typical histrionic putz thinking. Always going for the most sensational story.

“Not quite a killer,” Jefferson said, apparently sensing a misfire. “I don’t think that, not in my heart.”

“Your story’s implausible. Too much missing time.”

“I kicked around Monterrey for a spell. Worked on the rigs for a couple years. I told you that.”

“Out there on the Gulf?”

“I liked it out there.” Jefferson sucked a spot of grease from his thumb. “Nobody on the rigs cared much for remembering. They were all there to forget.”



Waylan nodded. Getting warmer, at least. Better than that killer-on-the-loose dreck he was spinning a minute ago.

“So just give me a few hints to work with, Waylan. Might help me get into—” Jefferson trailed off, patted his knee. “I mean it might help me remember.”

“Too late, Jeff. For all your flaws you’re still a terrible liar.”

“We can agree on that,” he said, voice going muttery as he leaned back into his seat.

“What about the oil rigs and the pockets full of coke? I thought those were nice embellishments.”

“Cocaine’s downright wrong. He never cared much for the hard stuff. Not to mention you’ve overplayed the cynicism and the profanity. Really, your southwestern accent in general, it feels forced.”

Waylan balled up his food wrappers and lobbed them into a receptacle. He reached out the window and stacked their wooden trays in a metal bin and then cranked the ignition. As the car angled out toward the highway, Jefferson leaned back into his seat and finished his burger with half-hearted bites. He drew off what remained of his drink and eased back into the seat. Waylan’s eyes found the bold sea foam green billboard stationed across the street from the Gulf Burger lot. *Fastest Food in Town*, it said. Across this gaudy backdrop sprawled the bones of a sea turtle, its bleached skeleton now weathered prehistoric gray. Waylan wondered if this turtle might have crossed paths with the one that he’d seen that morning. He knew they could live a long time, though he wasn’t sure if their lifespans were closer to fifty years or one hundred and fifty. However old it was, the skeleton didn’t resemble any plausible living creature. More like a huge, flattened mushroom studded with four paddles. Some primitive mockup that ought never to have functioned in the world, ought never to have lasted beyond a desktop armature fashioned of jointed iron and surrounded by compressed cigarette butts. Then again, so often the world

itself felt like a museum populated with prototypes and crude sketches. So often, the world that passed in front of him looked like it was folded out of craftpaper.

Jefferson was trying to tell him something. Waylan had nearly forgotten he was still here, humoring this talentless goof.

“I said why not let me meet your lady?” Jefferson said. “Might help with my memory.”

“Reeve never got to meet her.”

They rode in silence, the road a loose rubber belt drawing them past downtown blocks of crumbling brick and stone, green ivy stalks gripping the buildings from floor to rooftop like they’d budded into being as fruit, pink cornices with gaudy flourishes showing through the growth. Behind them, to the far north, the tangled architecture of refineries rose in mesh patterns against the greasy skyline, scaffolding for a world still trying to grow its skin.

Waylan pulled over at The Salty Bean, a local watering hole for caffeine junkies. The place’s outer walls were glassed so that the patrons inside reminded Waylan of suave aquarium fish. Jefferson could call for a ride, buy a pastry if he got hungry. Hell, he’d be fine. Waylan patted Jefferson’s shoulder and shoved a coil of bills into his hand, eager to be rid of him.

Jefferson frowned as he counted the money. Then he levered open the door and stepped out. He wouldn’t enter the shop, just stood there watching, like he’d make sure Waylan was okay to drive. Standing there, Jefferson was at least as sulky as Reeve. Waylan had to give him that. Espresso drinkers watched through the glass, their mouths forming half smiles as they tried to guess what might’ve happened.

“I’m still your buddy,” Jefferson called.

Waylan throttled the gas and watched Jefferson’s hangdog face get smaller and smaller. So what if the guy had good intentions? He still couldn’t act worth a drizzling shit. Waylan

rolled the radio dial and tapped out of time to a Sound Garden song that came through broken and shapeless. Something about a *black old son*, or maybe a *black hole sun*. Either way, it was Waylan's kind of song.

#

When he returned to the lot, Owen was already stalking the roweled earth with his shovel, tending upturned ground here, prodding holes there. He might've been patrolling a cemetery during starless witching hours, apprentice ghoul gloating over the newly-expired.

Waylan climbed into the excavator and broke the ground along the creek zone by zone. At first there was little of anything to be found beyond the odd brick or tree root, but an hour later he felt the bucket scrape against a structure buried in the earth. He could feel it through the control handles, too loose for soil, but not firm enough for stone.

They picked at the ground with shovels, Waylan and Owen whispering like thieves as they guessed at what sort of artifact the bloodsoil might offer, the excavator drowsing in oak shade. Eager as yard dogs, they cleared the loose earth, revealing rotten slats of wood.

"Ammunition box from the Civil War," Owen said. "Didn't Grant cross through here?" They lay with their bellies pressed to the ground, their heads peering in from opposite sides.

"Might be a shipping crate," Waylan said. "Might be anything."

"Can't we dig it out?"

"We have to report to that archaeologist, miss what's-her-mug."

Both of them laid their palms upon the moldered slats and began wiping away the residual dirt, the wood flaking away under their fingertips. Shame about Jefferson, that he couldn't play Reeve, couldn't *find* Reeve. But maybe the excavation would offer some kind of

clue. He liked digging in the earth, peeling away the old layers. He liked wondering who or what was under those boards.

He and Owen wiped more dirt from the box. Their hands remained flat on the rotten woodgrain long after it came clean. Like feeling for a pulse.

## CHAPTER 4

Waylan sat at a desk in the living room, his hand hovering near the drawer that stowed all the newspaper articles about Reeve, from fishing tournaments to his disappearance. Waylan felt the old brass key, the weight of it in his palm and the sour metallic smell of it on his hands. The brass was warm to the touch, and he couldn't remember how long he'd been holding it. His eyes moved to the locked drawer of the desk and then back to the key. It was bad, this whole drawer business. Dangerously close to a shrine. Some families made museum exhibits of their dead child's bedroom, clothes heaped, toys just waiting to be handled, stuffed animals untouched. Not the Drangers. The contents of Reeve's room had been boxed up and attic-stowed after just a few weeks. Now that room was an unused office at his father's house—a different kind of shrine.

Using his thumbnail, Waylan scaled a fleck of oxidation from the key's blade. Inside the drawer waited a newspaper article that had browned and faded over the years. The picture of Reeve they'd chosen was an unfortunate one taken during a fishing tournament. Reeve was holding up an indignant-looking fish and he was shirtless, his chest splotched with tentative patches of hair. The same physique of all the Dranger males, an uneasy compromise between skinny and flabby, like their cells communicated poorly, each one trying to form a different sort of man. Somehow this cellular crapshoot had endowed Reeve with a face that was well-proportioned, with good strong cheekbones, clear skin. He was not unhandsome. Reeve's fingers had taken an odd position around the fishing line in the picture, and it looked like he was giving the middle finger to the photographer. No one else had ever noticed that particular detail, and Waylan had never pointed it out to anyone. A secret he shared with Reeve.

He took another swallow of bitter coffee and cupped his face in the palm of his hand. No need to open the drawer. Over the years he'd memorized the text.

*16 year old Reeve Dranger of 511 Castilleja Drive has been reported missing by his family of the same address. Reeve left the Janus Beach docks at 8:30 am on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> October and has not returned to his home since then. He was last seen wearing jeans and a brown t-shirt.*

*The National Weather Service issued a severe thunderstorm warning for coastal regions of the county at 7:30 am on October 20<sup>th</sup>. Fishing vessels in the area reported high seas, heavy rains, and moderate winds. Local fishermen also made unconfirmed reports of raining fishes and waterspout activity near the coast.*

*Anyone with information concerning his whereabouts should contact the local police station or the nearest police station.*

That was all. An entire person could disappear and be reduced to a one-line description: jeans and a brown shirt.

In the weeks and months following Reeve's appearance, Waylan had spent most of his time combing the dunes with a flashlight or tacking missing posters to light poles. He'd watched as police shuffled through the house, posting up like drowsy cats on his mother's plush chairs. He'd hated their slick black shoes, glassy leather that broke the rain into beads, these men and women who sat drinking coffee from steaming paper cups, like there was no reason to be hasty. They regarded Waylan with the same vacant expressions, parroted the same procedural questions each day. *Age? Approximate weight? Height? History of substance use? Last known whereabouts?* They frowned in response to Waylan's questions the way Reeve might frown at a tangled line: *How long?* kinds of questions, and *How close?* kinds of questions.

Mostly, though, Waylan had hated when they made casual gestures. He hated if they drummed their fingers, or if they said anything playful, like *okee-dokey*. He figured everyone around him should suffer for whatever Reeve was suffering, lost wherever he was. Waylan had wondered how a fireplace poker might torque his wrist as it came down over the skinny cop's skull, the mealy grinding of bone as it gave way beneath the iron like the seashells he'd crushed under heel as a boy. He'd wrung his hands as the cops yawned and tapped their feet when they ought to be looking for his brother.

Now he opened his eyes to a chiming of keys and lifted his head from the desk. The front door creaked open and in stepped Sam, attended by a blonde who stood two heads taller. He'd seen this woman's lethargic expression before. The two of them led one another into the den and stood by Waylan's desk, arms entwined, a sisterly gesture that made him turn away, to the dog, anywhere. As they edged closer, he caught a faint whiff of the boozy weather they carried with them.

"Hiya, gorgeous," Sam said. "Meet Bondy."

"Gorgeous your real name?" Bondy said, bending down to rub Balthazar's floppy ears. A commanding voice, though lacking the dynamics of a voice like Sam's. The sort of voice that would sound earnest no matter what facetious bend she tried to impose on it. She'd be terrible at telling jokes, this Bondy. But as she stepped over to the desk where Waylan was sitting, her frame carried whatever elegance her voice lacked, long bones that poured into place as she moved. Waylan took her hand and gave it a firm shake.

"Been called worse," he said. "Nice to finally meet you, Bondy." He squinted at her. "That your given name?"

“Parents named me after some dumpy suburb of Paris. Guess they figured I’d be a debutante when I grew up.”

“Never too late to be a debutante.”

“You won’t find me ritzing it up in France. Some fine people we have in this country to name their kids after places they’ve never been.”

“They could’ve named you Skagway.”

“Your sweetheart’s something of a smartass,” Bondy said, turning to Sam.

“You have no idea,” Sam said. Then she turned to Waylan. “We’re going to the movies and then we’re going to talk art projects. Bondy has some ins with the Austin circuit.”

“Come with,” Bondy told Waylan. “I might even share my popcorn if you let me sit next to you.”

Waylan frowned and hooked his finger around the drawer handle.

“Not tonight,” he said.

“He’s working on a new project,” Sam said.

There was something different about the way Sam’s words tumbled out all at once, like she couldn’t wait to verify that Waylan wouldn’t be coming along. Usually, she tried to guilt him into going to dinners and movies and art shows, but lately she wouldn’t even push for details when he declined.

When they were gone, Waylan locked and re-locked the desk drawer. *New project*. What exactly did that look like? Sitting there moping over The Reeve Drawer? Was it Reeve he really felt sorry for, or was he in the throes of self-pity, as Sam sometimes implied? Hell, he didn’t know. Probably it was self-pity more than Reeve pity.



Enough with pity, then. Last thing he wanted was to be pitiful. He flung the key into a dark corner of the den, where it clipped a wall and rang like a coin. Now that Jefferson hadn't proved out, he wasn't sure who or what might fill Reeve's absence, but he knew he'd need more time. Waylan came down on the couch next to the sleeping Balthazar and retrieved the remote control from deep between the cushions.

"Just you and me tonight," he told the hound. "And I'm not even sure why I didn't go." Balthazar slurped his own nose. Waylan bent down to kiss the bony part of Zar's head. "So much is already in motion." He spread his hands to illustrate. "Even if you see the falls coming, how do you get out of the river? You're already in it up to your neck, Zar." Waylan nodded to the old hound, who smiled, eyes bright with good will. No hurry, no panic in the soul of that animal. Balthazar moved in six-eight time while the rest of world hustled along in four-four. Waylan had always envied that.

He turned on the television and cued up *Twin Peaks*, which went in and out of focus, lots of static on the tape. He wasn't sure which episode it was, but he could tell the detectives were getting closer to naming Laura Palmer's murderer. They had some sketches of the suspect, and they'd found Laura's diary, the contents of which would set up the next set of plot twists. Waylan already knew who the culprit was, but he enjoyed watching the characters solve the case all over again. At some point they always figured it out, and that was when he'd stop the tape. He didn't like to watch the part at the very end, where Special Agent Dale Cooper got possessed and went crazy.

## CHAPTER 5

Side by side, Bondy and Sam stepped past the movie theater and its lighted marquee, but they didn't venture inside. The lit end of Bondy's cigarette flared in the dark, swung from her mouth down to her thigh. She offered it to Sam and Sam took a drag, her eyes pinched nearly shut. Because why not? Tasted like a fireplace poker, but at least she was out of the house, at least this was *new*. Life was supposed to feel new and immediate—that's what she always told her patients at The Center.

She and Bondy came to an old brass water fountain with a stone basin, pausing to drink, and she didn't mention her need to swish out that horrible ashy taste, only that she was thirsty. She loved Bondy, loved that a brilliant artist could be so down to earth. So much better than the pretentious art school kids she'd met. And she felt so much closer to Bondy, ever since her art show in February, the one with all those plaster arms that groped inward from the walls, pointing to and even poking the patrons who passed too closely in their stuffy suits, heads made huge by their artfully disheveled hairdos. Together, she and Bondy had even watched a few of the clumsier aficionados spill their glasses of pinot as they wandered into outstretched plaster arms and legs. Waylan had stayed home that night, and Sam liked not having to worry over him and whether or not he was having a good time. She stayed for the entire show, and Bondy introduced her to several gallery owners. She told them Sam was *someone to watch out for*, and each time it made Sam blush.

Tonight she felt her entire body humming at a subsonic frequency only she could hear. Every cell was a bee with restless wings. Romping with Bondy. Absolutely romping. She liked how their laughter rang down Main Street. Gaudy gift shops, their parti-colored exteriors still warding off the darkness, shades of sherbet and bubblegum and key lime. They passed Gaston

Beach's most photographed souvenir shop, its front door sunken in the maw of a great white whose mouth and snout thrust out at the street, menacing all three dimensions, so that to gain entry, patrons had to march past its perfect arrowhead teeth. Darkness made the predator even more sinister, the voids of its eyes, the gums painted blood-bright.

They stepped faster, swerving around guttered bottles, chasing the gull shapes of windblown newspapers down side streets lit by strung pearls of electric light, the night folding them in as it will.

"We could have a drink somewhere," Bondy said.

"I have a better idea," Sam said.

Further south, they stepped over the low wire fence, their flimsy shoes dragging in the sand until they went barefoot. They scaled the dunes, sea oats rasping against their bare legs, the beach spread out like a fainter reproduction of the broad moon that gave it light. They lay side by side and she didn't know what this meant, only that it felt warm beside Bondy, warm and *right*. She smiled at Bondy and then at the gibbous moon, her heart heavy and light all at once. She remembered how as a child, she'd tracked the cries of a sparrow where it'd fallen down the chimney. The bird hopped out of the fireplace flocked in soot and cried as she nudged it into a glass jar. When she carried the jar outside, the bird inside felt no heavier than a cotton swab, but when she set it free it wouldn't fly. That was the problem—you couldn't let yourself get too heavy to fly. She didn't usually have to ask her patients how they were feeling. Often, she could assess at a glance how badly their lives stacked up on them, heads listing on their necks like they were filling up with hot ball bearings.

"How's he been lately, Sam?"

“Good days. Bad days.” She weighed them in her palms and then let her hands fall across her little jut of a tummy.

“I’m sure he’s trying his best.”

“You want to hear an old psychiatrist’s joke?”

“Of course.”

“So there’s a patient who becomes convinced that he’s made of corn.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very good joke.”

“Doctors take him in, give him a few years of treatment. When he’s finally cleared and released, he comes reeling back through the door, all trembling and sweat-soaked. Says there’s a chicken out front, and he’s afraid it’ll eat him. The doctors tell him: ‘Settle down, you know you’re not really made of corn. You’re a person.’ Know what he says?”

“I give up.”

“He says, ‘Of course I know I’m not made of corn, but does the chicken?’”

Bondy flexed her toes, like she was wrestling with the takeaway. After a while, she said, “So it’s like the difference between believing with your head and believing with your gut?”

“Something like that.”

“After all this time you’ve spent with Waylan’s imaginary chickens, no one could fault you if it was time to move on.”

“The chicken’s not imaginary. In the joke, I mean.”

“Well, I think it’d be funnier that way.”

“It’s not that kind of joke. Anyway, I don’t know how Waylan would handle it if I left.”

Sam recounted to Bondy how she’d met Waylan here at this very beach. They were both walking the dunes on overlapping trajectories, destined to collide. She’d been hunting for sea

glass and whatever shells could be found—the spiny murex, the gentle white swoop of angel’s wings, or the whorled shark’s eye—and Waylan had been searching for that lightning glass he liked so much. She spotted the shock of red against the sugar-blasted beach before she actually saw him. He’d sliced his foot on something and hadn’t realized it until she pointed to the dotted line of blood he’d painted in the sand. He just kept smiling at her—the handsome doofus—even as she drove him to the urgent care facility, which was located across from The Center. They took Sam’s station wagon, him bleeding into an old coffee cup because she kept telling him not to mark up the floorboard. He smiled his wincey smile the entire time, demonstrating a piece of the hollow glass and handling it with care. She knew immediately that he was a fellow lover of those unlikely treasures the rest of the world overlooked. He even tried to offer Sam one of those fulgurites as thanks for driving him to the hospital, but instead she made him promise to invite her along for the next expedition, and that got him grinning even brighter.

“Jesus Christ, I think I’m getting a cavity,” Bondy said. She’d heard the story before.

“Say what you will,” Sam said, “but I can still stand to look at him in the morning. And wait till you see the clock he’s working on.”

“Not that you should listen to me, being that I’d like you all to myself, but girl, you’ve got a bad case of what I call *savioritis complexis*.”

Sam smiled. Okay, there might be some truth to that, but as she often told her patients, a loving relationship was a lot like playing that kids’ game where you tried to rock the marble through the wooden labyrinth. Point being, the marble was always tilting to one side or the other, or disappearing down a trap hole. Reciprocity was never perfect, and good luck trying to find an ideal balance point.

Bondy was long and lean beside Sam, and her shirt was hiked up over her midriff. A tattooed octopus lurked beside her pierced belly button, greedy tentacles snatching at the jeweled ring. They were such repulsive creatures, the squids and the octopi. Shapeless, with cold, expressionless eyes. But she had to admit that this one on Bond's belly was tiny enough to be cute. A baby. Sam touched the octopus, felt Bondy's skin give like kid leather. She smiled and Bondy smiled back. They were lying close together, and she wanted to hold Bondy in a new way, in a way that she'd never held Waylan and he'd never held her. Not better, not worse, just new. She smiled again and Bondy smiled and turned away.

Past their feet the waves wore on, a restrained giving and taking, the world itself a perpetual reconfiguration—not dying, not destroyed, just beautiful and impermanent.

*Happening.*

#

She stopped at the doorway of the den. Waylan lay in the flickering light of *Twin Peaks*, limbs resting at odd angles. Looked like he might vault up from the couch and shout accusations, but instead he moaned and thrashed about, lost in yet another nightmare. Must be exhausting to dream his dreams. Balthazar brushed past her like a shrunken hotelier and settled onto the floor beside Waylan.

The music trilled out of key. An owl hooted in the dark. Something bad was about to happen to two camping guys. Lights flashed, then a robed druidic figure appeared in silhouette. In a corny flash of light, a fat, chinless guy in a beanie got snatched away. An alien abduction, she remembered. Waylan had all but worn out the cassette.

Schlock TV, unpasteurized mind milk flowing down out of Hollywood's dreary bosom. First they'd done the Westerns, convincing little boys that gunning down Indians was a heroic

deed. But this latest line of trash might be more insidious yet, every movie trying to convince its viewers that all the nonsense was real—the monsters, the ghosts, the CIA conspiracies. Little wonder that so many of her patients suffered hallucinations and paranoid delusions. She keyed the screen off and bent down to Waylan, his face shiny with sweat. She ran her fingers through his hair and they came away damp. Yuck. She wiped her hand clean on Zar’s back, and the hound started wagging his tail.

“Waylan,” she whispered, shaking him. He mumbled and rolled onto his side. She took up his wrist, felt his blood ping under the skin. Always so phobic. Of everything. Did he really think no one else was terrified but him? She could turn it off, that part of her mind. She could distance herself from that feeling that she’d been shot out of a cannon, everything moving deathward at full steam. Sort of like letting her eyes unfocus. She wished for his sake that just every now and then he’d have the ability to forget, to sublimate. Yes, plenty of good horrors to choose from, but sometimes she wanted to tell them all—Waylan, her patients, everyone—to sharpen their teeth and bite the world back! Of course so much came down to misbalanced chemicals, and there was no sense in faulting people for their own molecules. As Sam sometimes had to remind herself, no one chose to be dysfunctional.

She waited until Waylan’s pulse lagged and fell back into a steady tempo. She kissed him near the mouth and winked at Balthazar. Would’ve been nice if Waylan had saved her from more nightmares. Little things like that would’ve meant so much. Maybe then she wouldn’t be thinking of how she was going to tell him goodbye.

She stood and made for the bedroom, Balthazar in tow. In Waylan’s absence, she could sprawl out so that her body stretched to both corners of the bed. An expansive feeling, like her body had overshot its own borders. A self that couldn’t be enclosed. She liked that.

She tossed and rolled in the faint glow of a disco-era deco clock that she and Waylan had bought from a yard sale and fixed up. The cool feel of her plain satin nightgown, the fabric smooth and loose against her skin. Graceful curve of her hips. Wasteful. This plentiful, this *abundant* body of hers, and no one appreciating it but her. Lying on her back, she watched the fan turn its tireless circles and tried to sleep. She could hear Waylan stirring in the next room, the couch springs crying under his weight.



## CHAPTER 6

In the dream, Waylan stood among the dunes and watched as a storm cell carried in from the Gulf. Gulls oared the sky with their wings, fleeing its approach. A shadow dulled the sea glare as the storm crossed open water. Myles kneeled upon the false desert, waiting under the cloud's low-slung belly, his knees sunk into the ground like he'd been born of it, eyes wide and set at opposed angles. The boy's body quaked as his arms worked, a snake charmer begging fiery serpents from the sky. He wore a pair of faded jeans and no shirt, and beneath his exposed skin veins and tendons strained. He pressed at the air like he was shaping wet clay. The storm gathered about him, the cloud's rough underside winding up like the hem of a skirt, still holding back its first rain. Purple fire lit the walls of the thunderhead, but there was no thunder to answer it. The surrounding air crackled and nipped at Waylan's skin, and sure, he was frightened, but not for Myles, and not for himself. Even though he couldn't see him, Waylan knew Reeve was south of them, out in the Gulf, where the lightning would fall, where windstorms would whip the water into stinging white eddies.

He was still haunted by the dream's imprint the next morning, as the three of them—Waylan, Owen, and their boss, Nels Prescott—stood in the lot watching the archaeologist pry at the buried crate. To Waylan, Prescott had forever resembled an introvert butcher dressed in overstarched finery and stranded at a dinner table populated by dentists and bankers. Waylan watched him fidget inside of a shirt so neatly pressed that it was always rising up, trying to flee Prescott's body. Nels Prescott, the perennial over-compensator. Nels Prescott, who must've thought that wearing pressed shirts would make him more intelligent, more cultured. The man sweated more than anyone Waylan had ever met, and even now he kept wiping his forehead, alternating shirtsleeves. He might've purchased the shirt earlier that morning, but he'd have it wringing wet

before the day was out, great wellsprings of sweat that began under the arms, at the neck, down the back, fanning outward until they eventually merged in total saturation.

Prescott might be trying to impress the archaeologist, but why? Maybe the man just wanted to make a good impression, since today they'd drag out whatever was buried in the ground. War supplies from Grant's crossing? Replacement axles for Conestoga wagons? Waylan had read of an old saloon that operated here until late into the nineteenth century. Maybe there was a connection. The possibilities were endless as long as it stayed buried—a Schrodinger's Cat of wooden boards. In fact, he'd almost rather it remain in the ground. More and more, he suspected that bringing things to light ruined them. When Waylan was a child, the most exciting part of his birthday had always been the colorful packages themselves, and never what was inside.

"But what is it?" Prescott said.

"We don't know," Waylan said. "You said not to do anything until the archaeologist gave us approval."

"Sure, but just what in the hell do you reckon it is? This is a lot of money we're talking about. I mean to say, it better not be some sort of liability. Why should I be liable for what's underground when all I'm trying to do is create honest work?"

"What if it's an Indian burial ground?" Owen said. "It's supposed to be bad karma to dig those up."

"Yeah, and what if it's holy snowing goats?" Prescott said. "Around here you can't blow your nose without defiling something sacred. I say plow ahead."

"Well it's not one anyway," Waylan said. "The Karankawa tended to mound their dead."

"Now I know that's not right," Prescott said. "Never heard of any necrophile tribes."

“I said *mounded*,” Waylan said. “Shit, never mind.”

“Well I just hope it’s not cursed,” Owen said. “For our sake.”

“Cursed is right,” Prescott said. “According to Waylan, the tribes around here liked to get amorous with their dead. Maybe we can ask the archaeologist to verify it for us. Carbon-fourteen or the like.”

Waylan knew his boss would be waiting for a rejoinder, but he stalked off to wash his hands and face in the creek, cursing as he went.

#

Connie the archaeologist watched the excavator clear the remaining dirt the same way an impresario might observe a bare-handed plumber clearing a clogged toilet. She wore an orange and white flannel shirt sun-dulled near ochre. Waylan was pretty sure—he couldn’t hear over the excavator’s racket—that she was grousing under her breath as she finished chaining the exposed box, her hands clay-streaked. When she finally waved for them to continue, Prescott and Owen looped the loose end of the chain over the bow of the machine and secured it. Cradled in chain, the crate came up swinging gently, Waylan’s hands light at the controls.

Waylan fantasized gold ingots stacked under the lid. As the box cleared the walls of the turned earth, the chain bit through two of the lowermost boards with a soggy crunch. Waylan cut the engine.

“That figures,” Connie said.

An assortment of narrow ivory tusks protruded through the broken crate. A Swiss fortune in ivory. All the roulette wheels he could decorate with inlays, all the jewelry he and Sam could make and sell.

“God,” Owen said. “It *is* a coffin.”

The archaeologist cut in with derisive laughter. “What’d you all expect?” she said, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “Load of doubloons?”

“I was hoping for a load of doubloons,” Owen said.

*As was I, Waylan wanted to say. As was I.*

Waylan looked again. It wasn’t ivory, but a yellowed femur that angled between the broken slats. Most of the metatarsals had sheared off, and what still remained hung swaddled in blackened rags.

“Man alive,” Prescott said, shaking his head. He spat at the ground, nailing one of his own boots. The sweat was really flowing now, just twin angel’s wings of dryness left on the back of his shirt. He gestured to the coffin and shook his head. “Once again, history flashes her ugly crevasse. They’ll want Forensics out here, I guarantee it.”

Decay soured the air. Human remains, but they couldn’t possibly be Reeve’s. The box was too old, the bones stripped too clean. Waylan could smell it from the cab of the excavator, the sharp and earthy tang. Nauseating, but with a comfortable edge on the back end, a certain hominess that could be dangerous if you got too close. Terrible to admit, but he could understand how you could get used to the smell. Like losing a lower order of virginity. He felt a little ashamed at the sight of those naked bones, like he’d been caught reading someone’s diary. Still, he couldn’t stop staring.

Waylan thought again about that dream he’d had, Myles trying to drag lightning from the sky. He sensed a connection between the dream and the box of bones, but what? Maybe Reeve was broadcasting prophecies from the beyond, clues about his disappearance. Waylan didn’t really believe in that kind of thing, but it was equally ridiculous if his dreams meant nothing at all.

## CHAPTER 7

After work, Waylan and Sam rode their bicycles to the beach and wandered shoeless along the dune crests, their first beach trip that spring. Hadn't been a terrible day overall, and he'd only spent minimal time brooding about Reeve. Sometimes his vision had a way of going bent with bad chemicals, and then it was like confronting the world through those x-ray vision glasses that showed up in the magazines he and Reeve had pored over as children. He'd begin to see the world through fish-eyed glass, though as long as he was taking his medication, he could usually take a few deep breaths and clear his head before things went too twisted. If he really tried, Waylan could usually ignore his darker impulses, sort of like averting your eyes from somebody's goiter. But if he wasn't careful, he'd start hearing things—laughter layered beneath the television snow, plaintive distress calls in the droning power lines. Sometimes curiosity drove him to listen. And it wasn't such a far stretch from hearing things to seeing them.

He focused on how good the sand felt against the bottoms of his feet, how the grains crept under his weight. He and Sam walked eastward, separated by some ten yards, combing the dunes for what felt like miles. And this was more or less how they'd met, how he'd come to carry a certain crescent of scar tissue on the bottom of his left foot. A broken bottle, maybe? He'd never worked it out. But she, a perfect stranger, had stuck around while the doctor stitched him up, mocking him every time he flinched against the needle. Being in her company made him forget all about Reeve, and despite the pain, he couldn't stop smiling at her and staring at her lumpy prizefighter's nose.

After a hundred yards, he spotted what they were after. At the top of a dune, an extrusion of what looked like staghorn coral, but it wasn't coral. It'd been years since he'd seen one. He took a tiny paintbrush from his pocket and set about swishing away the loose sand. The more he

excavated, the more the thing forked and branched, ending in fine capillaries. When he'd cleared all the sand away, he had a pencil-length branch of the hollow white glass. *Fulgurite*. Glass from lightning, the charge so intense that the sand flash-boiled, cured into glass. He turned it against the dimming sun to see inside the delicate branches, the interior walls polished smooth to the touch where such deadly fire had passed. Sam had retrieved two more such pieces by the time he caught up with her.

They came down from the dunes and walked to the shore, stepping among beached pill and drink bottles and the sun-tautened shapes of fishes. At intervals along the shore, there were caution signs inked in bright red. A stick figure swimmer dragged under by a red arrowhead with tentacles. Humboldt squid. An entire fleet of these creatures had washed in and died, spotting the beach as far as he could see. *Red devils*, Reeve used to call them, though they were a rarer presence back then.

A steady wind drove down the shore, lifting the hot odor of ammonia so that Waylan's and Sam's eyes ran. What was it that she still loved about this place? Didn't make sense to live near a beach populated with nightmares incarnate. Best not to say that, though. She'd gig him for being too negative. She was always giggling him for being too negative.

A Spanish guitar had washed up face-down among the dead sealife. Waylan picked it up and held the body under his chin in the fashion of a violin. He sighted down the fretboard, saw that it ran fairly true. Moisture had left a series of thin fissures around the port, crazing the mosaic of rosette patterns that marked its perimeter. A ragged vein of barnacles clung to the soundboard. All told, it was still well-sealed and serviceable. The varnish had held its clarity, and the machine heads creaked to life and turned their corroded gears. Waylan strummed the crusted

strings with the tips of his fingers, and the instrument sang a dark and dissonant melody. Not musical, exactly, but something about the tone moved him.

“Sounds like hell,” Sam said.

“Believe I’ll keep it.”

Their shadows fell elongate on the sand, the copper sun smearing out into a molten puddle. The wind tousled their hair, whispered senselessly into their ears. Sam was probably thinking that this was still a beautiful place, despite the squid. In a way, she’d be right.

“The eyes are always the first thing to go,” Sam said.

“Whose eyes?”

She was smirking at the ground, the bridge of her nose pinched and wrinkled in mock disgust. “The fish,” she said. “The eyes are always the first thing to go. I wonder why that is.”

“Because fish are wisest of all creatures. Sight’s the first thing they give up to death because it’s crappiest of the senses.”

“Clever,” she said, using her toe to trace ribbons in the sand. “See, I always thought it was because the eyes dried out fastest, but I like your idea better.”

“You do not,” he said, feeling his muscles go watery.

She took his wrists, her grip loose, though her eyes told him she could grip as tightly as she liked. She had moose strength, though he’d never say it. He’d seen her beat grown men at arm wrestling.

“You rehabilitate any notorious delinquents today?” he said. “I mean hypothetically-speaking and in keeping with patient confidentiality.”

“Just one who set fire to a playground. Hypothetically.”

“A playground? You ought to toss him into county. They trade hypothetical petty arsonists like cigarettes.”

“It was a hypothetical little girl. And the playground was empty when she hypothetically burned it. And anyway, she didn’t do a very good job. Fire just kept dying.”

“You think you can get through to a kid like that?”

“Of course,” she said, squeezing his wrist. “Sometimes they do make progress. Sometimes they just need someone to talk to, someone to tell them they’re forgiven.”

“But returning to the fish—”

“Let’s not talk about those fish.”

She swung her hips to some waltzy number Waylan couldn’t hear, but he set the guitar down in the sand and chuckled and swung along anyway. Maybe if he stared into her eyes long enough he’d finally come to see the world as she saw it. Sam glanced at their feet.

“I know something’s wrong,” she said. “You found something today.”

“Lafitte’s gold. Would you believe it?”

She shook her head.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Why not skip town? Change of scenery would do us good.”

“Tell me,” she said, squeezing.

“We don’t know who it is yet.”

“You mean it’s a person?”

He shrugged, and they both sat down in the sand. Sam took his wrist again.

“You know it can’t possibly be your brother, right?”

“I’m tired of thinking about it.”



The surf broke just offshore. Tangled refineries stood against the horizon, the open water beyond leading to the deeper Caribbean blues.

“Would we miss this so much?” he said. “Sure it was pretty once. Now with these things in the water we can’t even go swimming like we used to.” He motioned to the dead squid. “And it might be good for me to live in a new city. Might be therapeutic.”

“We’ve been over this. There are people here that I can’t just leave behind. And the money.”

“That excuse is getting tired.”

She squeezed his wrist, but he was staring westward, where the failing sun left orange and red-lit clouds in its wake. Looked like the entire western edge of the world was burning. Who could say it wasn’t? Maybe that was how things worked, every sunset marking the world’s cremation, a new and perfect replica rotating into place each morning. They sat in the sand and watched the inflamed sky color the water in endless reiteration, Waylan with the stomach-fluttering sensation that the world was spinning too fast, that the centermost axis couldn’t possibly hold.

That was the worm talking, he was pretty sure. Who else would wax so darkly about a sunset? And now he felt the familiar flood of bad chemicals that often caboose the moments he enjoyed. Here came the obligatory brooding on behalf of Reeve, who was probably—no, almost definitely—dead.

He’d been out there with Reeve in the sound when they were younger, though never to those mythical distances the dead sea turtle had known, never out where the sun scaled too high and the sea flattened out, hypnotizing the mind, conjuring mermaids and whirling maelstroms. He’d only been far enough to know that the world was a bigger place than this town. They sat

together in Reeve's boat for hours, pulling in pale fish whose bodies strained and curved in the sunlight and then lay trembling against the deck.

"Don't you ever feel pity for them?" Waylan once asked, nodding at a dying triggerfish. They were the first words he'd spoken in several long minutes. The ice in their plastic cooler was gone, but Reeve dredged up a beer bottle from the meltwater.

"It's like Dad always told us," Reeve finally said. "The fish play by the same rules we do. The big ones eat the little ones, else they'd die."

"Not all of them do that," Waylan said. "Some of them eat slime. Some of them eat the other fishes' shit."

"That's their loss."

"You should talk to Prescott. There's money in it if you stay a while. You wouldn't have to work underneath me. We could both be foremen after a while."

Reeve gave Waylan a sour look before taking a long swallow. A handsome kid, with eyes that carried the sea. "You think I'm too good to be a fisherman, just like they all say you're too good at everything to waste your time running a backhoe. But maybe we're not too good to do what we do. Maybe elsewhere we'd just fail."

A few minutes later they hauled in their lines and watched a red-striped propeller plane drag over the coast, banner in tow. An advertisement for oysters on the half shell. Reeve snorted. After it passed, he shipped the oars and rowed them for the docks in silence.

So much of their relationship had entailed such moments. Some people lost a family member and felt longing for the good times, the together times. But Waylan couldn't remember enough of those moments. More often, he felt a longing for the feeling of togetherness he'd

never had with Reeve, a feeling of regret that they'd not been closer, not been good enough brothers.

As the western sky burned, Waylan put his arm around Sam. Her eyes were closed, like she'd evacuated her body and gone someplace more compelling. Where was it she returned to? Who was it she'd rather snuggle up next to when they watched the sun set?

Waylan had to get well, and quickly, or moments like this would define their future—him stewing in Reeve guilt, getting worse every year, and her insisting that they stay put. All the while, he could actually feel his mind going chalky, reduced like a stick of incense. Sam could probably sense it, too.

## CHAPTER 8

Prescott was still perched among the lower branches of a magnolia tree when Waylan arrived at the job site. He didn't notice Waylan, who studied his treed employer through narrowed eyes. Legs swinging beneath him, Prescott sat like a great sweaty owl, eyes fixated on scant semi-desert woods, scanning for wasteland mice, maybe. Today his pressed shirt was colored like a robin's egg. How long before he sweated it through to a nice dark navy?

The night before, Waylan managed to tune the TV's antenna to a PBS show featuring sharp-dressed physicists who speculated on the possibility that reality was a kind of soapy foam, each little bubble containing a different iteration of the universe, and now he couldn't stop thinking about alternate realities. Maybe in another universe his boss was always laughing instead of sweating. Maybe in another life their construction crew was busy building the southwestern equivalent of the St. Louis arches instead of clearing the lot of a future fast food joint. More importantly, maybe somewhere Reeve was still alive.

Prescott was still sitting in the tree, oblivious to Waylan. It'd be rude if Waylan waited any longer, and he was worried that in a moment Prescott might do something really embarrassing, like break into song. So Waylan jangled his car keys and Prescott snapped to attention and nearly rocked off the limb. He came down red-faced and coughing, magnolia blossoms raining down after him and bursting against the tree's roots.

"Thought I smelled smoke," Prescott said, wiping sweat from his forehead. "But I don't see none—*any*. Connie should be here soon."

"Who?"

“She’s the geologist. I mean to say the archaeologist. She’ll poke around for a few more corpses and then we’ll be on our way.” Prescott used his sleeve to blot a patch of forehead sweat.

“I swear these academic types think we don’t know anything.”

“Maybe we don’t,” Waylan said.

“I say it’s all a front to forestall the developers, the real movers and shakers. But they can’t stop the likes of us, Waylan. Not over the bones of some dead nobodies.”

By midday, Connie the archaeologist had grown so torpid she took to pointing out new excavation sites with a jerk of her thumb. Hole after hole came up empty until finally they hauled out two more pine boxes and loaded them into the back of her pickup.

That made three boxes total, and Connie was pretty confident that there’d be no more. Three boxes, all of similar construction, all rotten to a similar degree. Waylan thought he might know who was in the boxes, and Reeve wouldn’t be among them. He felt his chest muscles relax.

When they’d finished, Prescott and Owen wandered down to the creek to wash their hands and cool their faces. Connie stood facing the cratered ground and used her thumb to peel a boiled egg. This was by far the most amused she’d appeared all day, but Waylan was about to blow her mind.

“It’s the Jenkins brothers, isn’t it?” he said, motioning to the broken ground.

“How’d you know about the Jenkins brothers?” Her speech was punctuated with little blasts of egg flake.

“Just a hunch. I read those articles. Folks haven’t used those crude pine boxes for a long time, and I knew they wouldn’t send an archaeologist out here unless it was for something historical.”

“Historical,” she said. “Couple of horse thieves is what they were, and the records have it that the eldest one turned out a batch of moonshine that blinded half a dozen townies.”

Waylan leaned closer. “How sure are you?”

“About what?—those Jenkinses?”

She stuffed what remained of the egg into her mouth and drew out the shell, which she let fall in a fleshy wad. Then she turned on her heel and walked off toward the pickup. She was nearly to her truck when he realized she meant for him to follow.

“Take it you fancy yourself an expert,” she said, wiping egg from her mouth. “I wonder if you remember anything peculiar about their dentition.”

Her hand snaked through a broken slat in the bottom-most crate and emerged gripping a browned human skull, her palm pressed tightly against the crown. She spun it like a bowling ball to demonstrate the jaw, fingers sunk in the orbitals like this skinless head had voided her into existence, the fingers of her free hand forming last.

“That’s right,” Waylan said, eyeing the skull. “They were rumored to have gold teeth.” He bent down for a closer look.

“Rumored is the operative word.” She tapped at a pair of oversized incisors so green they might’ve been carved from jade. “They were rowdy, these three. Loved a good scrap, hence the false teeth. But I’ll wager right now there’s not a drop of gold to be found in there. Probably cheap brass with high lead content. My theory is the lead’s what finally killed them off. Couldn’t have tasted too sweet, either.”

“You handle the bones like that? I thought you all used goggles and toothbrushes.”

“Nobody cares about these fools. Their own people buried them in shipping crates. See, they send me out to dig up horse thieves and rapists and worthless little pottery shards just to

remind me that I can't take part in the real stuff. Bronze cannons, Lafitte's shipwrecks, the known things."

"People might want to know about the Jenkinses," Waylan said. Maybe they weren't exactly genteel, and maybe they did have some bawdy tendencies, but it galled him that she had to be so dismissive.

"Oh, people'll know about them soon enough," she said. "I'll publish a little old book about these three, and brother they'll sound dramatic. They'll slam saloon doors and draw pistols at the crossroads and run moonshine across the desert. These here will eat it up."

Connie motioned to Prescott and Owen, who stood glaring into the creek and dropping stones onto the fish that it harbored. As she turned the skull for Waylan, a load of sediment drained from its nasal cavity. With plump fingers, she brushed more dust away, her eyes remote, like she was still only peeling an egg. Waylan admired the bulbous shape of the skull. She held it closer for him, the hint of a smile on her face, like death had lost its fascination a long time ago, and now she could only appreciate it vicariously.

The Jenkinses hadn't been good people—he knew that. Still, he couldn't take his eyes off the browned cap of the skull, which was laid bare and dark as caliche. Which brother did this skull belong to, anyway? Leroy? Abram? Young Giles? He watched mite-sized horsemen ride along the trackless bone landscape. A tiny quaking sun made its retreat over the parietal bone and smothered itself over what had to be the Gulf, pale clouds dyed flesh tones, no petroleum rigs to spoil the view. Caribbean voices called out over the meager skull waters, waves carrying traces of salt and marimba tones, the gentle collisions of rum-filled glasses. Somewhere down there was Tortuga, brethren of the coast, nights overseen by the ghosts of all those buccaneers, their legends living on, riding from island to island on the tops of bright little clouds.

He saw the Jenkinses and saw the world as it must've appeared to them, still blood-raw and unmapped, unenclosed. He watched them as they died together, laughing, baring their brass grins each to each, to eternity, recanting nothing. As he studied the skull, it was easy to believe that these roughnecks were noble somehow, that the western frontier and its grisly expansion had been a naïve and courageous venture, rather than a barbaric bloodletting of the landscape and the people it sustained. Whoever the Jenkinses were, Waylan drew from their water. He lived on their land.

After Connie had packed up and gone home, he climbed into the station wagon and angled it south, wondering if insanity could spread like seed, drawn up from the soil by the milkweed that furred the Jenkins brothers' graves, then riding the breeze into new territories.



## CHAPTER 9

At darkfall, Myles emerged from the cover of magnolia trees—always his favorite to climb. Dressed in his faded Danger Mouse shirt, he studied the construction work, wringing his hands like he expected something finished to beanstalk up out of the earth as he waited. He didn't expect that, of course, but he liked how the construction site made him think of an unwashed dinner plate.

Near the excavator's jointed tracks, he found an empty coffee cup and an egg shell, which he cradled in his palm and sniffed. There was no evidence of Ms. Sam. Sometimes she came to the construction site to talk to Waylan, but he'd not seen her today. That was too bad, but it'd still be a good night for walking.

Myles picked his way down to the creek, where finger-long trout swam. The smell of the water was full in his nostrils, cool and mossy. He took in the salty tang of the Gulf three miles to the south. He smelled the rain that wouldn't fall for another two days—he was pretty sure—and the sticky smell of the magnolia blossoms all popcorned open. He paused among a tangle of balloonvine—*cardiospermum*—where his fingers traced the runners and stalks. He twisted one of the little green fruits free and held it to the moon. Thin-skinned and hollow, it kept the light like a paper lantern. He balanced it in his palm and set it afloat on the creek, but the moon's light had already escaped and the fruit was sucked downstream, into darkness. He tried twice more before crossing the creek, light not behaving the way it ought to.

He loved slinking through the wasted and weedy lots. No one would be there, and he wouldn't have to talk. He hated all that tongue-flapping, hated his voice and the way people looked at him when he spoke. There should've been a better way. Ants talked by trailing their stink around and scraping the ground with their butt-whiskers. He'd much rather do that than talk

the normal way. When he was ten years old, he hadn't spoken voluntarily for six whole weeks, but the entire time he was trying to broadcast his own brain signals. Hadn't worked, of course, though he did manage to freak out some of the trailer park mutts.

He knelt to taste the radishy flower of the nasturtium, a.k.a. *Tropaeolum majus*, its leaves at home among the pads of dollarweed. He bent to pluck a colony of pony's foot, or *Dichondra carolinensis*, pale stems and leaves like green hoof prints. The knifey green flavor made his nose hairs tickle. He gathered the greens and mixed them in with a bed of dandelion leaves. Like a foot surgeon, he sat and labored over the ripe and purpled figs of prickly pears, or *Opuntia lindheimeri*, his open knife unjacketing the sweet purple fruit inside, fingers working between the spines. For dessert, he ate the dark clustered fruit of saw palmettos, the tenacious *Serenoa repens*. The drupes tasted bitter, like the wine he sometimes snuck from his mom's forgotten bottles. Food always tasted better when you picked it yourself.

As he drew closer to the bay, pedestrians gave him funny looks, like always. To the abandoned bayside picnic tables, where he jostled among squawking nightbirds for the unfinished chips and sandwiches, all items halved and left behind in offering to a cause Myles had never understood. Folks were wasteful, pretty much. He ate the abandoned stuff without much pleasure. So salty, but still bland somehow.

Squatting beneath a streetlamp, he studied the glossy pages of a discarded magazine and was only partly aware of his knife's work as it traced the borders of smiling women's faces. It wasn't a sexual thing, not really. Just that he liked to pretend they were smiling at him. Especially the ones with teeth like white glass.

Ms. Sam's teeth were like that, and he'd been trying to find a face like hers in magazines, just to see if another such nose could exist in the world. He freed the faces slowly, careful not to

bend, careful not to tear. Myles folded them into the front pocket of his suspenders for later, when he'd sort them all out on a picnic table or whatever flat surface he ended up favoring. There'd be whole crowds of prize-winning faces.

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Late in the night, another streetwalker ventured past Myles's lamppost. There was something familiar about this guy, who introduced himself as Jefferson. Myles knew his freeflowing gait, the salty smell of him. Jefferson uncapped a tiny glass bottle of rum and sucked it down, the caustic fumes all but overwhelming Myles, who'd never understood how people could drink that stuff, so potent you could practically hear it.

"You want a little sip?" the man named Jefferson said. "I think I still got a teeny-tiny vodka on me somewhere."

Myles shook his head. He'd sooner drink baywater.

"Any chance you know this Waylan Dranger fella who runs with the construction outfit by the creek?"

Myles frowned, now that he was obligated to speak. "He lives with Ms. Sam," he said, his voice like ground rocks. "Sometimes there's blackberries out by the creek. *Rubus fruticosus*. High in tannins and vitamins B, C, and K."

"Yeah, but what do you know about him? Waylan, I mean."

"He lives with Ms. Sam."

"I believe we've covered that part, friend." The man eased himself closer to the ground, his eyes scanning like there might be listeners posted in the darkness. He frowned at Myles, like he was taking him in for the first time. Myles got this a lot from strangers. "How is that you know his lady, Ms. Sam?"

Myles shifted, unsure how much to tell this guy. “Used to go to her office. Now she tells me to keep away most times. I think he tells her that. He never liked me much.” That was the other problem with speaking. Once he got going, it was hard to hold back. Sort of like trying to stop peeing before you were finished.

“I can relate. Waylan got any other kin to speak of around here?”

“His brother was that Reeve Dranger. Used to grab up a load of fish guts before he shook my hand.”

“Fish guts,” Jefferson repeated, cracking a smile. “What else?”

“He disappeared. Ms. Sam says he’s not coming back.”

The man swept a hand through his hair. “Reckon I could pass for Reeve Dranger?” He swiveled his head and offered a series of different expressions for Myles’s consideration, most of them stern.

“I don’t know,” Myles said. The truth was, this guy looked very much like Reeve, so much so that it made him sort of unlikeable. “Guess I didn’t much care for Reeve, and now you’re starting to remind me of him.”

“Reeve Dranger,” Jefferson said, his eyes fixed on something Myles couldn’t see.

“Why you asking about the Drangers, anyway?” People were always asking about the Drangers, but Myles had never found them all that interesting.

Jefferson blinked and licked his lips. “I don’t rightly know. He picked me up when no else would. Gave me a place to stay, even though he turned me out just as quick. Suppose I’ve been curious why he did it in the first place.”

“Well he never did me any favors.”

Neither of them spoke for a time. It was uncomfortable, watching this man suck down his smelly little drinks. Myles had better things to do. Should he speak first, tell him goodbye, or was it better to say nothing at all? The man emptied another little bottle. Myles came to his feet and left Jefferson squatting on the sidewalk, his back arched against the lamppost. Jefferson could sort it out by himself.

Myles set out for town, his eyes scanning rooftops for a suitable place to lie down. He liked sleeping outside when the weather was warm, and with the new baby, his mother's trailer had become a firing range for crying—from the baby and from his mother—and diaper errands. Easier on her if she didn't have to pay for Myles's food and whatever else all the other kids needed. He could still taste the bitter traces of palmetto berries on his lips as he scaled the rain gutter behind the ice cream shop. He found a dry spot far enough from the thrum of the air conditioning units and lay on his back beneath the wheeling stars. Beside him, a vent piped up the faint odor of shit and hand soap, but Myles didn't mind. The breeze would carry it all off, and at least nobody was crying.

His hands fretted over the pocket of his shorts until one by one, he pulled out the smiling faces. It was a good batch this time, all of them very pretty, though none of the faces looked like a good match for Ms. Sam's. The teeth and noses were all wrong. Her face was exceptional, was singular.

After a while, he replaced the prints. To the south, he could barely make out where the Gulf became a wet mouth that gummed at the shoreline. The town below him had gone quiet, dimly lit by a lacework of twinkling salt pearls. He'd like to capture the look of all those pretty lights. He'd like to taste the world like he still tasted the traces of palmetto berries. To carry it all inside, digest it. All the teeth, all the mossy creeks, all the pretty little lights.

## CHAPTER 10

In early April, Sam and Waylan rented *A River Runs Through It* on VHS. The image of father and sons lashing the air with fly rods and landing rose-bellied trout drove Waylan to the art room, where he could weep with impunity. The following morning, he was entaloned by a paroxysm of desire for rod, reel, and open water. He'd been thinking a lot about The Reeve Drawer and the article that it enshrined, and had to know once and for all what kind of solace had bubbled up inside his brother's thick-walled heart as he sat and drifted. Maybe he could understand Reeve in short installments, get past the whole mourning process a belt notch at a time. He wasn't going for the regular sorts of fishes, though. Waylan was going to rid the water of as many squid as he could carry.

He walked a few miles south, to the brackish pass that separated Gaston Island from the mainland. Even from there, he could make out the neon crackle of light across the water, where the boardwalk pulsed its coastal parody of Times Square. He could make out the electric shrieks of the gaming booths. Alarm bells sang their shrill cries and fell off again, a raucous and dissonant score that made him feel lonelier yet.

Waylan's plan was to fish from the dock there on the sound side, but at the open marina he found a docked skiff, its fiberglass prow crusted with minerals. The skiff was so weathered, so heavily barnacled that it felt familiar to him somehow. Maybe this boat was a loaner, kept around just in case some passerby found himself in need. Didn't even have a name, or if it did, it was chalked over with bird shit. The marina was quiet, no sound but water licking at the wooden pilings. Who'd miss this crummy little boat?

The moon over the sound looked low on batteries, surrounding water darkening so that the pass spread out like an absence burned into the landscape, the skiff suspended over nothing.

He rowed south until his arms burned with the effort and then let the boat carry a while. With so little moonlight, it was tough to tell if he was making any progress. The docklights along the shore were hardly moving, but when he turned around to check his progress, he saw that he was farther out in the pass than he thought. To the south, he could see where the darkness emptied out into the turbulent Gulf, where squid likely gathered in larger swarms. The nearest oil rigs were closer at hand, no longer evoking the lights of a far-off metropolis. He could make out the crude architecture of the first platform, a lighted city pulling tar from below the seafloor. So why not take this shitty rowboat out into the open water for some real fun, like Reeve had always claimed he did? Why not go full-tilt? Maybe he could climb aboard the rig, see if they were hiring.

To the south, the coastline near the boardwalk cut a pale arc in the darkness. He could still make out synchronized punches of light where the arcade entertained its sleepless. The Ferris wheel winked hypnotic patterns over the island, blooming and dying, blooming and dying. He'd only been gone a few hours, and already he wished he was back there on the boardwalk, maybe eating some funnel cake or some fried pickles.

He'd learned nothing about fishing so far. Was it the waiting that captivated people? Or was it the thrill of the catch—the uncertainty of whatever ugly sea creature your line might drag from the depths?

He reached under his seat and pulled out a package wrapped in foil. The peppered whitefish and sliced potatoes inside were cold. The fish oil had jelled into a thin gravy, which he scraped up and sandwiched between slices of fish and potato. The meat was salty and good, and he ate all of it. When he was finished, he plunged his hands into the water and saw the oil spread outward in an iridescent slick. Ripples broke at the surface. He caught glimpses of sea creatures

giving chase. Nimble tentacles stirred in a rolling and faintly luminescent mass. The squid were finally surfacing to feed.

“They’re smarter than you think,” Reeve had once told him. “And powerful. You get the feeling that if you were to fall overboard they’d be ready, and they’d make short work of you.”

Waylan hefted the jig, a simple instrument lined with four rows of gleaming barbs at the bottom, and at the top, a wax bulb that glowed like a shrunken moon. Far from any suspicious ears, Waylan spoke admiringly of the jig, muttered about the elegance of its design.

These squid had long, meaty bodies, and if you cooked them right they were supposed to come out tender and sweet. Each animal would yield at least two slab-like steaks. Plus, he liked the idea that by eating a nuisance species he’d improve the beaches. Maybe someone would write a newspaper article on him, or interview him on TV.

He unpocketed a plastic orange pill phial and held it up to the moonlight. He took a mouthful of water from his canteen and then uncapped the medicine bottle and clutched up a single maroon pill. “Geronimo!” he yelled. Then he came to his feet and swiveled about. Someone might hear him shouting and think he was in actual distress. That’d be just his luck if they came to investigate. Tough to explain that sometimes he just enjoyed a good shout. He turned a few more circles, scanning for other boats. Even here, in the open, he felt eyes following him.

He rolled on a pair of thick yellow gloves that covered nearly to the shoulder. Probably wouldn’t catch anything, but just in case. With the flick of a wrist, he cast the murderous bait, the rod straining briefly under the weight of the jig. Water sloshed where the lure fell. He reeled slowly, trying to imagine those mauve creatures riding underwater, rubbery missiles.



Wasn't much longer before he had one on the line. The struggle was brief. The reel did its work, and by turns, the first squid arrived at the surface in a tangle of ropy arms. He reached over the side of the skiff to net the animal, which rode back underwater with a lurch so violent it sent Waylan reeling against the gunwales. He came down on the bench seat and dropped the net in his left hand, his right still hooked in a tight fist around the fishing pole, its prize still heavy on the line. He worked the reel, his hand measuring slow circles. A few seconds later the squid resurfaced and he swung the net under its flaring body before it could dive again. The animal felt heavy as luggage as he lifted it out of the water, and for a moment he worried the handle might break under the strain. He dumped his catch on the floor of the skiff, where it writhed and purged ink, ear-like fins slapping the deck. Huge chrome eyes marked either side of its tubular body, and they narrowed down as Waylan watched, like the animal was deciding whether or not to mug him.

As Waylan reached to retrieve his lure, air passed through an internal siphon hidden in the sleek body, producing a tremendous fart that sent Waylan backwards onto the deck for a second time. The creature's eyes followed him down, deep-set plugs of charcoal edged with steel, so black he figured his thumb would bear the stain were he to touch. He wasn't about to touch. Waylan watched as a loose tentacle wound twice about the handle of the net. He leaned forward to pry it away before the squid could brain him. God damn. Could they do that? Reeve hadn't said anything about their motor skills. Waylan decided he'd wait for the animal to die before he cleaned and dressed it.

The commotion of frenzied squid piqued and he wondered if they were crying for vengeance in some squid argot, a distinct sequence of underwater farting, maybe. But the racket around him sounded too rhythmic for squid, and Waylan edged back in his seat as two neat rows

of human digits hooked over the gunwales. Reeve pitched into the boat, his young face and neck lashed with tentacle marks. He blew water from his nose and spat overboard. From his knobby shoulder, he peeled a loose tentacle.

It'd been months since Reeve visited, and sure it felt wrong, but there was also something reassuring about his showing up, even if he was scowling even harder than usual.

"I'm still waiting on that weather report," Reeve said. He'd only ventured a glance at Waylan when he spied the squid piled on the floor. Reeve lurched backward, eyes thrown wide.

"Settle down," Waylan said. "That's my dinner."

Reeve dropped onto the seat and lifted the net. He gave the squid a tentative jab with the net and when it didn't respond, his shoulders went slack.

"So now you're a fisherman," Reeve said. "What about the construction job?"

"I don't talk to you anymore." Even Waylan knew it was a lame thing to say.

"Why's that?"

"You're gone."

"Sure I'm gone." Reeve began rummaging about the boat. "But as long as I'm out of existence—" he trailed off, more interested in dredging the foam cooler for a longneck. Reeve uncapped the bottle, and Waylan noted the musty smell, though he knew he hadn't packed any beer. Reeve motioned to the Ferris wheel. "You remember the night we had differences out on the boardwalk?"

"We're not talking about it."

"Shit, Waylan. You believe you're just imagining this whole conversation, right?"

"I do." He cradled his head, started massaging his temples like he could work Reeve right out of there.

“Well, convince yourself I’m not real if that makes you happy. If I’m not real, I guess there’s no harm in answering the question, so long as you know it’s really just *your* question. Do you remember or not?”

“I remember.”

“I still laugh about it from time to time,” Reeve said. He tilted his head back and drank.

“About what?”

“You nearly broke my nose. I can remember that part clear enough. I just can’t remember why it was we came to blows.”

“We didn’t. You spent all of your money at the goldfish booth, and you walked off crying when I wouldn’t give you more. Stop making our lives out like they were gritty.”

Reeve shook his head. “We went home with bloody noses, brother. That’s what I remember. You needed me, admit it.”

“What was it I needed you for?” It wasn’t sarcasm. He really wanted an answer.

“To be reminded that you were better than me.” Reeve looked away. “No matter how bad you screwed up, you’d never do worse than your brother. Isn’t that it, Waylan?” His laughter sounded strange on the open water, like someone gasping for air after a kick to the belly.

“We were never any good at this,” Waylan said. “Being brothers, I mean.”

Reeve aimed a finger toward the coast. “I necked my first girl on that Ferris wheel, same as you. Brotherly traditions, Waylan. We were the same where it mattered, see? My blood, your blood.”

Reeve tilted his beer in Waylan’s direction, like it was his turn to talk. Waylan had nothing to say.

“Anyways where’d you get the boat?” Reeve clacked the gunwale with the heel of his bottle.

“Bottom of a crackerjack box,” Waylan said.

“Regular goddamn comedian. Where’d you get it?”

“I make decent money now. I can afford things.”

“You’re a lying bucket of shit,” Reeve said, eyes steady on Waylan. He pressed the cold bottle against the inflamed skin of his shoulder. “I know what Nels Prescott pays. Bet you stole it off the docks.”

True, though he’d never planned to steal a boat.

“I just wonder what it is you’re trying to prove,” Reeve said.

“Meaning what?”

“Oh, come on. Out here by yourself, nightfishing.”

“You never fished for these.”

“They’re trash. Ought to feed them to the homeless. What I want to know: Are you trying to grieve for me or replace me or be me or what? Ask that shrink of yours what she thinks of it.”

“I’d never tell her.”

“You won’t tell her you went fishing with your long-lost brother? She might take exception, Waylan.”

“You’re not my brother.”

They were silent while Reeve finished off what remained of his beer. It was always during the silences that he said the most. A demonstration of authority, like he was collecting his words for use in the future, when he’d really zing you. When Reeve was finished, he submerged the bottle and watched until the last bubbles cleared. Then he nodded and set to climbing

overboard. Straddling the gunwales, he hesitated, frowning at the squid, a deflated monster soaking in a pool of its own fluids.

“I’m staying,” Reeve said, “sure as you’re sitting there with that dirty thing in the bottom of your stolen boat. Nothing changes, Waylan. All these years and you still mope around this town, bullshitting about the big city. Deep down you know you’ll die here. Well I’m staying, too.”

Then he was overboard and lashing at the water. Reeve had only made a few yards before he stopped to rail at the feeding squid. Waylan could only make out a few choice words, but he could hear Reeve half an hour later, distant now, but still cursing. At least he’d gotten Reeve to leave. That was a kind of victory. It showed that Waylan was still in control.

#

Waylan came to port on the bay side feeling very much like a saucer-eyed creature of the sea himself, his frigate heavily crusted with barnacles and birdlime. He shipped the oars, secured his lines, and stepping for the dock, frowned briefly at the inked deck. Was this what Reeve had felt when he returned from fishing expeditions? Waylan didn’t feel all that satisfied as he gathered up the meaty squid fillets. He’d pulled a muscle in his shoulder, and he stank of the sea. Every victory Pyrrhic at best.

The coastline was subdued now, veiled under a contused sky, the unlit bulbs along Azar’s gray as bubbles dividing in soap curd. To Waylan, the Ferris wheel’s darkened architecture implied the spider’s craft in wrought iron. No laughter plumbed these long hours of the night, no voices but the sea’s and the murmurings of inebriates who’d nestle together in the sand until the sun finally peeked over the water in a welter of red, beckoning them to their feet and to the recitation of half-earnest regrets.

He'd walked those miles to the docks of the marina, and it was a good night for walking back. He strutted like a majordomo, taking high strides, his footfalls exploding off the asphalt, thick jellyrolls stowed beneath his gloved arm, mattresses that he might unfurl if only he found the proper hostel. The pale meat flashed like milkglass under the moon, slime trailing in thick ropes. In his other arm, Waylan carried the net and the fishing pole.

"Chews a lot like a sea scallop, or so I've heard," he explained to passersby. They were few. Most of the vagrants and nightwalkers paid Waylan little attention, like they were used to seeing much stranger sorts of people carrying much stranger cuts of meat. Waylan came across a bearded curbside panhandler who'd taken up residence in a blown truck tire. The guy was clapping and stomping as he belted out the same verse of "This Land is Your Land" over and over. Waylan dropped a decent squid steak into his lap, but the guy looked like he wasn't sure what to make of it. He ended up wrapping the fillet in newspaper and using it as a seat cushion.

Further north, at the derelict switchyard, Waylan saw where the freight trains gathered like a lost band of travelers meditating over a wet map, dislocated souls fading in a world without need of them. Waylan ran a still-wet hand over a rusted guardrail. Standing there in the moonlight, he wished that he could somehow polish their wheels and axles, somehow mend their rust-shot husks and ride the rails further west, dawn breaking behind him. Kind of tragic how these cars would probably never ride again.

He picked his way carefully over the tracks and away from the coastal streets, the scenery flattening out and drying, growing barren as he moved north. His remaining journey was attended only by a gang of cats coalesced from darkness, lean-boned and sidling. They stalked him along the highway, their noses twitching, probably picking up the fishy smell of the fillets. After a quarter mile even they scattered and mended back into the darkness.

Waylan paused at the carport of his own home. Underfoot on the doorstep waited a shrunken cherub, a token that reminded him of old mythologies, those homuncular mangrove plants shrieking as they came unearthed, or taking root beneath the death-spent seed of a hanged man. He leaned the rod and the net up against the side of the house and picked up the figure. Looked like one of Myles's creations. Kid was always making clay figures or leaving dirty flower bundles for Sam, like he was trying to court her or something.

Waylan cradled the figure in his palm, turned it over. A raw body fashioned of the earth and unmistakably feminine, the arms, legs, breasts, and belly smoothly contoured. Was this chubby cherub supposed to be pregnant? What'd it mean? Even felt warm in his hands. Weird.

He thought about throwing it out into the street, but Sam would probably find it anyway, so he carried it to the art room and shelved it among the oddities he'd stocked over the years. A lot like taking in an uninvited guest out of—what else?—sheer politeness. But at least she couldn't say he got jealous and tried to toss it out.

## CHAPTER 11

The inside of the house clouded over with seafood smells as he and Sam alternated cooking duties, beginning with squid omelets for breakfast, squid chowder for lunch, and pan-seared cutlets over penne—Waylan’s personal favorite—for dinner. The fillets came out nice and tender, and not too fishy. Fine-grained meat that peeled easily into strips. Waylan sat with a swollen belly and picked the salty bits from between his teeth. Balthazar sprawled over a square china dish in the kitchen, patiently gumming at his share of meat.

The art buyers always came early in the evening. He’d check them out through the window before he opened the door, see them standing on the porch, hands pocketed. Restless, like patrons waiting outside a whorehouse. They paced. They tapped their feet. They chewed.

Tonight’s couple whistled as they entered, and Waylan met them with the warmest handshake he could muster. The woman’s neck was wattled like a turkey’s, her bleach-bombed hair showing a full inch of gray at the roots. The man wore collared flannel and smiled because he had to, because being here probably wasn’t his idea, and his only defense was to feign complicity. No stranger to patrons like these, Waylan wasn’t.

When Sam opened the bedroom door and stepped into the den a few seconds later, Waylan had already forgotten their names and stood there muttering and picking at a hangnail. Why the clumsy rituals? He’d be perfectly happy if they just shoved a wad of money through a slot cut into the door and took their package without him having to perform for them, the handshaking, the smiling, the chitting and chatting.

Sam smiled and led them toward the den, Waylan trailing like a senile shopkeeper. This had become part of the ritual. Inquiring buyers were more likely to connect with an item if they walked into the house and considered it within the greater context of their den, which had a



bunch of other artworks that lived together as a kind of family. Most people couldn't make sense of a fancy lamp if you showed it off in the middle of a badly-lit parking lot, for instance, but the soft lighting in the den brought out new depth in Waylan and Sam's trinkets. Still, what was Waylan supposed to say? He knew they'd come to check out the lamps, but he didn't want to come off like one of those pushy used car salesmen.

Sam led them past shelves of glass bottles and a coffee table topped with lacquered-over beer caps. He knew they'd never buy that stuff, but it did a great job of setting the tone for his lamps. In particular, Diana the moon goddess in cast bronze. He'd rescued the burnt green figure from the bucket of the excavator, first mistaking it for the hood ornament of a luxury sedan. He'd left her on a shelf for over a month, where she reposed, like she was tuckered-out from her nightly hunts of doormice and scorpions. In a spasm of inspiration, he hollowed out her foot with the hardest drill bit he could find and ran wire from there through the hollow middle and through the bottom of her outstretched arm, where he installed a little lamp and capped it with a white glass moon, its surface intricately cratered with fine strokes of his paintbrush. When he finally tested the globe, it lit the fine contours of her face and threw her silhouette across the far wall.

When Sam threw the switch, the woman's eyes went wide in the light of the full model moon, and Waylan knew as she ran her fingernail over Diana's face that the lamp was sold. Hell, she'd cut out half her husband's liver to have it. The husband raised his eyebrows and let out a low whistle. Wore his hair in a sort of modified crew-cut. Mr. Sensible. He'd probably rather spend their money on high-end cars and real estate. Investments that made sense, carried agreed-upon value. Not moon-goddess lamps. Those wouldn't make much sense to him. Mr. Sensible shook his head, like life was a constant surprise. Good. Now they could leave, go be surprised out there in the wild.

“She’s a beauty,” the man said.

“Just brilliant,” the woman said. “What was your inspiration?”

“Well, I decided to make a lamp,” Waylan said. It wasn’t snobbery, not really. Just that the truth was so simple. Step One: he happened upon the figure. Step Two: he made the lamp.

“Yes, but how long have you been into art deco?” she wanted to know.

*Art deco?* Was this one of those traps that the legitimate art snobs used to weed out impostors? Waylan could take no more. He shrugged and thanked them and went to the kitchen for the water carafe. Sam looked like she was suppressing the kind of smile that might cause facial rupture. She took their money and tendered the change, then wrapped the lamp in red tissue and sank it to the bottom of a brown paper sack with threshed wheat handles.

“What’s old will become new again, as they say,” the woman said, probably to Waylan. “Isn’t that right?”

“And what’s new will become old,” he said. “Terribly, terribly old.”

Mr. Sensible slapped his trousered thigh. His wife’s head pitched back and she worked out a warbling aluminum laugh. On her way out, the woman slid a small white card between Waylan’s fingers. He stood eyeing it and drinking water he wasn’t thirsty for.

“You let me know if you’re ever interested in designing on a larger scale,” she said, still smiling, big clodbuster teeth edged with coffee tar.

The door closed behind her and Waylan kept standing there, eyeing the curious rectangle wedged between his fingers.

“What is it, honey?” Sam said.

“Something about a furniture gallery.” He flipped the card over and studied the reverse side. If Sam hadn’t been watching he might have sniffed it.

“I think someone just made a new fan,” Sam whispered. She bit her lip and pumped her fine eyebrows.

“I don’t trust those people.” Waylan dropped the card, let it spin down into a loose pile of mailers.

“Maybe you should think about what she said. You don’t have to decide tonight. Just think about it. She thinks you’re brilliant,” she said, poking his belly.

He sat down in the recliner and took up his ruined guitar, turning the machine heads and plucking the corroded strings, his left ear turned to the hollow body. Tuning for the absence of melody. Just how bad could he get the instrument to sound? If ugliness had a ceiling, that might be a good thing to know.

Sam sat down on the armrest and draped her legs over his knees.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally said. “It’s just they make me so damn uncomfortable with their questions.”

“Well, we can’t just quit outright. We’re making money.”

“We’d make more if we moved to a real city.” It just came out, that one. Sam drew up her legs and stretched her hand far enough to mute his guitar strings.

“Real cities attract real competition. Anyway, I think that woman’s going to buy the oil can sculpture, so you have to be patient with them.”

“Fine, just tell her you made that one. I’m no salesman.”

“Waylan, I did make that one.”

She used his knee as a handhold and lifted herself from the chair. Then she was in the kitchen, metal tipping against glass as she stirred herself a drink.

Later that night, as he dozed off beside Sam, Waylan wondered what exactly that domino-toothed art lady had meant by larger scale. Would she have him slinging sweat-shop furniture in the snob catalogs under his name, with his grinning idiot's face included as an endorsement? What was so distasteful about that? What was different about his lamps that you couldn't find in a thousand trendy furniture catalogs?

Scale. It was a question of sheer scale. He liked the Diana lamp because it was the only one. As soon as there were a thousand of something they meant less, which didn't bode well for the whole multiple universe theory. Maybe that was what happened to God. The Alpha and the Omega stretched taffy-thin by all those totems, the runes, the humorless busts. Or maybe shattered into too many fragments, forced to appear in too many creation myths, too many household prayers and homilies. Overbooked, basically, measured out and trapped within the endless lines of icons and invocations, and finally winnowed down to nothing at all. In any case, Waylan didn't want his lamps showing up in any furniture catalogs. Lately, he'd been reading old issues of *Popular Science*, which went on about Fibonacci numbers and fractal recursions and terminations, none of which Waylan fully understood, though the parts he did understand disturbed him: loops of matter—ideas, even—curving in on themselves, breaking into smaller and smaller denominations that just kept winding and unwinding.

He dreamed that he and Sam were a pair of red-lined geometric figures, all hollow triangles and parallelograms. They kept getting reformatted, refigured, and then came the reductions, Sam and Waylan undergoing endless mitosis until they were fully dissociated, scattered into individual pixels that would contribute to no greater whole.

## CHAPTER 12

The inside of the pharmacy smelled like eucalyptus cough drops and germicide. Waylan waited in line before the consultation window with crossed arms. He studied the linoleum under his feet, a fossil record of shoe scuffs and spilled coffee and nameless grime. His prescription was folded up and clenched safely in his fist. Behind the attendant's glass window a phone clacked back to its receiver, making Waylan flinch.

The woman in line ahead of him sniffled and edged a bit closer to the window. She wore the haughty look of a one-timer. *Only here for sinus medicine*, she might've said. *Nothing serious, nothing serious.*

Not Waylan. He'd be coming here for the rest of his life. Dr. Jable had upped his dosage again, even though he'd used all the proper lingo. So long as he used phrases like *emotional compass* and *internal locus of control*—so long as he didn't say too much about Reeve—he usually didn't have to schedule appointments more often than each quarter. His most recent session had gone fine until he mentioned that sometimes the people in his life—Sam, even—appeared to be clipped from newspaper, while in his dreams, Reeve and the Jenkins brothers bent rays of light, they carried such radical mass. A costly screw-up. From anyone else, this would've been taken as a harmless aside, but these were the sorts of offhand comments Dr. Jable's ears were tuned for.

Feeling eyes on him, Waylan turned. Behind him stood a man in a tweed suit. Waylan gave him a dirty look to show him he was standing too close. He scanned the interior of the store. There were children's voices coming from one of the aisles, and then laughter. An inflatable rubber ball hove up moon-like over the aisle and then fell away. He heard laughter followed by the sound of toppling boxes. Near the store's entrance, an older couple sorted

through boxes of sugar cookies and canned soup. Waylan didn't see anyone he recognized, but he felt eyes watching him just the same.

When his turn came, he handed over the folded script and muttered his date of birth through a port in the glass. The pharmacist smoothed the paper out, licked his bloodless lips, and grimaced at Waylan, his eyes blue and severe behind thick spectacles.

"Sixty milligrams this time," the man said, whistling. "Okay, Waylan. You might want to give us some time. Hour, maybe."

Waylan turned and walked off, his eyes following the seams in the floor as they led him through the glass doors and into the heat outside. An entire hour. Might give him enough time to grab a bite to eat. He climbed into the station wagon and cranked the engine, smelling his own sweat. He rolled up the windows and sat, waiting for the air conditioner to do its work. A practiced voice droned baseball statistics over a wash of static.

Waylan didn't want to increase his dosage. He wondered if maybe he'd be happier giving in to his darker impulses rather than suffering another five years medicated. Maybe what he really needed was a return to his native state, whatever that might be. He ought to drop the meds, which would trap his ambitions inside bubbled glass, making them visible but unreachable. He'd be more docile, more likely to stay in town with his guilt and his numbness.

Waylan placed his palm on the shifter and rolled it to *R*. To hell with stronger dosages. To hell with taking any pills at all. He'd peel out of there and never come back. People weren't meant to spend their lives fogged up on pills.

He cursed and levered the shifter back to *P*. No, still not bold enough to leave. The few times he had foregone the medication, his mind eventually gave way to elaborate conspiracies—that Reeve was still alive, for instance, and the fisherman of Gaston Beach were holding him

captive to increase their odds of winning the local tournaments. He'd never told Sam about the night he charged down to the marina to interrogate the fisherman, demanding that they show him what really got stored in their huge Igloo coolers.

He'd stay on the meds for now. He'd keep the car in *P*. Be patient, he told himself, taking deep breaths, counting just like Sam had taught him. Be cool.

## CHAPTER 13

One lazy Saturday, Waylan drove Owen to the Gaston Beach boardwalk. Owen didn't have many friends, and lately he'd been asking questions about the boardwalk with guarded curiosity. Waylan didn't have many friends, either, so while part of him just wanted to offer Owen a break from boredom, the other part of him wanted someone to talk to. A buddy. Waylan missed Jefferson—at least, he missed the *idea* of Jefferson. He was still adjusting to the increased dosage, which had thickened his tongue and left him more ponderous yet.

The arcade lay in a veil of warming fog that crept up through the footboards and carried out to sea. The haze revealed parkgoers and game stalls singly, coins dredged up from a bottomless pocket. Waylan and Owen traipsed the strip, the younger man storkish in proportion, his mouth dusted with powdered sugar. The rollercoaster's intorsions appeared like wreckage through the fog, so that Waylan wondered if the riders could even appreciate its erratic course or if they, like him, only felt lost. Air thick as rolled fiberglass, and threaded with a cotton candy sweetness that made his teeth hurt. They were driven to search for cold beer or whatever chilled drink the boardwalk might offer.

“Do you feel better after you talk to her?” Owen asked.

Waylan glared at the faces in the crowd. “Dr. Jable?” he said.

Owen nodded.

“These shrinks, they tell you you're entitled to feel whatever it is you feel. Meanwhile, they just keep upping your dosage.”

Owen shuffled a bright green jawbreaker loose from the planks and sent it clattering down the boardwalk.



“Believe I saw a beer sign near that fried pretzel stand,” Waylan said. “Saw it from the tilt-a-whirl. Maybe we should head back that way.”

“Wasn’t a beer stand. They just had beer-themed shirts and hats and stuff as prizes.”

A barker with rotten fingernails stood before them and offered Waylan what looked like an ogre’s croquet mallet. Behind him, a sort of oversized thermometer. At the top of the contraption sat a chrome bell that burned back the muted carnival lights. The machine’s pivot had been left blackened and flattened with innumerable hammer blows, and above it sat a puck beaded with moisture.

“Step right up, stretch. Ring the—” The carnie at the counter paid them a louche smile as he studied Owen’s frail arms. He shook his head and swung the hammer to Waylan instead. “Ring the bell there, sport. You might just win your boyfriend a prize. Why, he don’t look like he could lift a duvet cover, never mention that there mallet.” When he spoke, the carnie projected his voice like he wanted to involve the entire midway.

“I’ll take the hammer,” Owen said, raising his chin.

Before Waylan could object, the money was already swallowed up in the carnie’s fist, like his palm came outfitted with a special orifice. He shook his head with practiced exaggeration. “Like he lost a fight with the taffy puller,” he said.

Owen left the game trophyless, still bearing his obligatory smile, the carnie’s face redshot as he doubled over the gaming counter. What followed them through the fog was not the theatrical carnie laughter Waylan was accustomed to, but deep, guttural cackling that sounded pretty honest. He was hoping maybe Owen would pick up on some of his cues, like avoiding the games of chance. Only dupes played the games of chance.

“They got parks like this one back in New Jersey?” Waylan said, eager to put the laughing carnie behind them.

“Dad took me to Coney Island one summer, but I was just little bitty.” Owen licked his powdered mouth. “He won me a kaleidoscope, I can’t remember how. But I remember it broke the next day.”

Owen paused to lean on a booth railing. He brought his foot up, found it fouled with a slick wet stripe that Waylan identified as chewing tobacco. Owen tore free a billboard hawking Azar’s Freaks and scoured the shoe sole. When he finished, he stripped an unsoiled copy of the leaflet from a lamppost and showed Waylan, who nodded and led Owen deeper into the silvering fog. He already suspected that Owen was enjoying the boardwalk about as much as he was, which wasn’t much. He knew this was supposed to be a place for joy and squeamishness in equal parts, but he couldn’t make the switch from outside observer to full participant. Best he could do was nod and advance, like he was watching it all happen through frosted glass. With his hands shoved deep into his pockets, Owen invoked a similar sense of self-alienation.

They strolled to the end of the boardwalk, where the human oddities prowled. What Waylan found most fascinating was the sequence—how the park arranged itself to transition from the amusements and confections up front to the dark and seedy freakshow waiting at the far end of the park. You couldn’t go straight for the freakshow. First you had to be seduced by the rides and gaming stalls, breathe a bit of the boardwalk weather.

“Did you and your brother ever come here, Waylan?”

Waylan faltered midstride, his mind cuing up images of nights spent rambling the boards with Reeve to watch stout mustachioed men roll in the sand with sickly alligators, their jaws bound with canvas straps. He had—hadn’t he?—doled out the money for cotton candy and

jawbreakers and games of chance. And later in the night, Waylan had left Reeve for the company of his school friends, bat-like in their outsized leather jackets, their hands pocketed as they promised themselves big rides, liquor flasks, the supple tits of willing girls bared to the shadows under the boardwalk. Late in the night, he passed Reeve where he leaned against the goldfish booth, his eyes set deep, rivets punched into the dark of his face. One of the few times Waylan could remember his brother crying. He knew then that Reeve would never be as tough as he'd like to be. Behind all the late-night fishing trips and the underage drinking and cussing, Reeve was more child than man, a hurt kid crying over an unwinnable carnival game and trying to wipe the red out of his eyes.

“Waylan?” Owen said.

More often than the actual day of Reeve's disappearance, it was the trivial moments Waylan obsessed over, dulled push-pins he was all too willing to direct skinward *ad infinitum*, like maybe he could purge the guilt from a million and one bloody little stipples. Or, if he could just go back and give Reeve another dollar to lose at the goldfish booth, just one more goddamn dollar, maybe he could keep him from crying.

A series of rimshots barked from the far rows of gaming booths, and as Waylan and Owen passed, Waylan saw that it was Myles who stood leaning over the gaming counter, the one eye of his Danger Mouse shirt winking at Waylan through the worried fog. A helical breeze stirred through the park, the fog disappearing in long sips, clearing around the booth like maybe it was Myles who displaced it. The boy leered at Waylan as he passed, his thumb and forefinger gripping a blood-colored dart. Myles turned around to face the balloons. He let the dart fly, and a bright blue bubble among the rows of fog-softened balloons winked out, exploding before the dart left Myles's hand. The booth's attendant glared at Myles, who angled a dirty finger at his

intended prize—a velveteen sea turtle whose eyes canted at odd angles from the booth’s highest shelf. The carnie retrieved it and passed it to Myles, who stood there like he wanted to keep playing.

“Hey, Rain Man,” the carnie muttered. “You got your prize. Beat it.”

Owen waited until he and Waylan were out of earshot before he spoke. “How do you think he won like that?”

“Don’t know. They dull the darts and deflate those balloons so they’re damn near impossible to pop. Kid probably cheats.”

The boardwalk carried them further, where the gaming stalls emptied out and stood vacant. Garish billboards flashed through the fog, enlarged tarot cards that hadn’t made it into the canon. Banners promised Azar’s bonafide freaks around the next turn, Waylan and Owen diminished by pastel renderings of the Bearded Baby, the Squid Man, the Octopus Woman, and Gamble, the Talking Head. Their overscaled forms paid reference to a mythology of perverse and the miscalculated. Waylan even began to lament his own body for its plainness. These mural freaks had transcended self-consciousness in some way, had empowered and even weaponized themselves with the sorts of deviant features that Waylan knew would only bring shame to someone like himself.

Only two other patrons attended Azar’s Freakshow: a young boy with a splint on his nose, and his father, who looked like he’d been pressed from naugahyde. Waylan had known guys like this to frequent construction yards, the sort who toted pipe collars like they were charm bracelets. This one capered like a child himself, feigning excitement in what was surely an attempt to sway his splint-nosed boy.

The usher unclipped a velvet rope at the entrance and motioned toward a strip of yellow tape that ran through the entrance and into darkness. They followed the tape to a cramped theater room floored with piebald carpet patches. The father and son took to the front row, leaving Waylan and Owen to pick their way among the lactic-smelling theater seats, past three with springs raising from their cushions in razor skeins. The room thrummed up with trapped voltage, and then a pair of lemony stage lights flickered and stabilized, revealing a stage whose sodden carpet langored under a haze of what he imagined were staphylococci with wings.

For the opening act, a rancid-looking clown set forth from the darkness pushing a rickety stroller, over which hung a black umbrella with missing ribs. A pale-faced nightmare, like he'd sprung from the very floorboards of the theater, his tufted red hair matted with grease, his maraschino eyes sunk behind a bulbous and seam-split nose. He capered to the notes of a detuned calliope, spun circles and hoisted each leg, a dire and pear-shaped ballerina. At length, he peeked into the carriage and covered his mouth with a dirty glove, his painted eyebrows arched and glistening. Waylan suspected that aversion to clowns was a more or less universal response, but somehow they were still propagating out there, like that orange or black spin-wrapped Halloween candy that couldn't decide if it wanted to be bad nougat or bad peanut butter.

There was a racket like an old phonograph stylus being dragged across a nail file, and the darkened room cleared its throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen—gentlemen, rather. How about a nice round of applause for Milo the Clown.” The voice sounded dissolute, summoned up from nothing.

Milo ducked away from the stroller and turned a cartwheel over the floorboards. The surly father in the front row cheered and jostled his boy, who bowed his head and began bawling.

Milo was on the kid immediately, like he'd been waiting. He flashed a manic grin and started tugging at the stem of a fetid boutonniere. He presented the squalling boy with a sunflower he might've picked from a coal mine, and even as the child stifled his cries, Waylan knew he was not pacified, just terrified silent. And the kid must've known what Waylan knew—that at any moment now, the trick flower would piss stagnant water all over his poor head. Milo stood there nodding frantically, and it was the dad who cheered loudest. But like so many of his fellows, this clown was a scholar of misdirection. At the height of the dad's cheering, Milo raised an enormous red shoe and brought it down with a tremendous slap. Still leveled at the kid's face, the trick flower hissed and jerked, issuing a cloudy rod of liquid that angled *away* from the youngster and bored right into the dad's eyes, sending him back in his chair with a dog-like yelp.

Waylan and Owen sat stunned for a few moments, eyes ratcheting between the still-capering clown and the dad, who sat grinding his wet eyes with his knuckles. Waylan was sure he felt the temperature rise a few degrees, then up came the father, convected by the magnitude of his own anger. He leaned forward, lashed blindly for any bit of clown he might seize and thrash. The boy resumed his sobbing, and no sooner had the father cleared his eyes than Milo faun-bounded back to the shadows. The father returned to his seat like something tethered.

“Easy does it, mister,” the speakers boomed. “Milo's laughing *with* you, not at you.”

“Like hell he is.” The father was shouting at empty space. “That mess he's dusted me with smells like pickled frog shit.”

“That'll dry off, mister,” the speaker intoned. “Now, ladies and gentlemen—pardon—gentlemen. Behold the *infanta barba*, the five-month-old with the five o'clock shadow, Drake the Bearded Baby.”

The umbrella dipped and swayed and out from the stroller climbed the little man Waylan had seen on the beach years earlier, his face knitted with dark hair.

“That beard look convincing to you?” Waylan said.

“Not exactly. I never really understood the point of these shows. Do they expect us to clap or be repulsed or what?”

“I never was sure myself. I guess if it was dignity the little fella wanted he wouldn’t let them tote him around in a stroller. Maybe he knows people wouldn’t buy tickets to watch a little person stand around and act dignified.”

Owen couldn’t seem to stop laughing.

“Hey Waylan, what is it you miss the most about your brother?” The question dropped, still smoking, into Waylan’s lap, a redhot fire dog, a real ball-scorcher. With watering eyes, he glared at Owen but could say nothing. He turned back to the stage, where a fresh pair of grotesques stalked beneath the spotlights. What did he miss about Reeve? Hell if he knew. How could he even properly mourn Reeve, who existed for him now in a way that he never could while living?

“You can tell a lot about a person by how they laugh,” Waylan finally said. “Reeve used to have this great laugh when he was a kid. I mean, he grew out of it. But when he was a kid, it sounded genuine.”

“Genuine.”

“When he got older, he trained his voice to sort of dry out. I think he was embarrassed of sounding more innocent than he was.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the speaker squawked, “Azar’s would now like to proudly introduce two of the finest specimens this side of Greek mythology. A kindly round of applause

for our polydextrous princess. She can read a book, make herself a martini, boil an egg, and run the treadmill all at once. Please welcome the Octopus Woman.”

Waylan recognized her from the beach as well—the same woman who’d burned through half a pack of cigarettes while she stood near the dead turtle. The arm was an obvious fake, since the flesh glowed like paraffin under the stage lights. That didn’t matter, though. Her conviction completed the magic, like somewhere in the structure of this hollowed appendage ran taut silk filaments guided by the deft spiderlimbs. Whatever graceful force moved the arm told him that the Octopus Woman believed in the weight of its bones, the flexion of its tissues. Again, he imagined her inelegance at the beach, the blandness of her two arms. He’d seen her somewhere else, though. *Bondy*. The Octopus Woman happened to be one of Sam’s closest confidantes. The elegance of her body struck him in a way he’d not noticed before. He wondered if Sam had seen her perform, and if maybe she felt attracted in the same way.

“I think what I miss most about my dad is beating him at cards,” Owen said, still whispering. “The old man had no luck for cards. Never won a hand in his life, but he was a good sport about it.”

Waylan nodded now in the dark of the theater. “I suppose I know what you mean.”

For most of his childhood, Waylan’s father’s car had a broken fuel gauge that he hadn’t cared to fix. They—Dad, Waylan, and Reeve—were driving to Hidalgo county to see about buying a farm lot when the engine throttled up and died. Dad had forgotten to clock the mileage. There were no phones, nothing but the ordered rows of grapefruit trees. So they all sat in the shade at the top of an irrigation ditch and listened to the insects whirr. They ate windfall grapefruit, dry and sour-tasting, and made a game of tossing stones at a speed post. Sometimes one of them would make a good throw and the sign would gong. Waylan didn’t care about



getting a ride. He would've just stayed there forever, throwing stones and laughing with his father and his brother.

The announcer played on the Squid Man, and Waylan knew him too, from the day of the turtle. He was hairless and stained bodily in purple ink, his teeth like ceramic quills. He only lacked the manacles, his long arms fitted with puckered sores instead. The human cephalopod danced into the spotlight, let it flood over his chancres to reveal dentoid rings.

“What do you think happened to the little guy’s beak?” Owen whispered, motioning to the still-crying child seated in front of them. “You think the dad’s a mean drunk and he just wound back and cracked him one night? My old man never would’ve done that.”

“Not so loud, Owen.”

The dad turned to see them, his face a charred moon, its counter lost against the stage lights. Hard to get a read on him, but Waylan didn’t imagine he’d be smiling. He studied the filthy floor as the announcer called on the next performer—a severed head who sang *a cappella*.

#

By the time the show was over, the clouds had darkened and reconvened at a higher altitude. Waylan and Owen lingered beneath the garish billboards near the exit. Owen pointed out over the water to a crested thunderhead with silver walls. Beachgoers fled the coast, hats clutched against the wind, turning back every few yards to confirm that yes, the storm was still on their heels.

“Looks just like one of those badass Portuguese jellyfish, right Waylan?”

To Waylan it looked more like a bomb detonating under water in slow motion, but he told Owen he agreed.

The theater's exit door winced open and out staggered the father. He frowned at the storm and then spotted Wayland and Owen, whom he studied with open hostility, like he was just a few degrees short of radiating anger visibly, through his skin.

"Howdy," Waylan said. "Your boy feeling any better?"

But the dad was already hauling up his sleeves, the cloth rolling away like a hide, exposing the pale shanks of his freckly arms. "My boy," he said, "is in the men's room washing the red from his eyes on account of he had to witness his daddy get spritzed by Scum-Fuck the Clown." He edged closer, his overripe belly pressing against Waylan. The man pointed at the space between their heads. "I know you were in on it, too."

Waylan glanced at Owen, who looked as confused as he felt.

"We were in on what, now?" Owen said.

"You think that's funny?" the father said, still shucking his sleeves. "I heard you giggling when he did it."

Waylan met eyes with Owen again, and this time the boy couldn't suppress his laughter. The dad, who'd been waiting for such an outburst, cinched up a handful of Owen's collar and clubbed him hard across the cheek. Owen leaned backwards, falling hard onto his back, like his heels were hinged to the deck—a dead sweep from ninety degrees to a full one-eighty.

Waylan didn't notice the first drops of rain until after the Squid Man pulled him from the prone dad, who sprawled across Owen. He had no memory of picking up the umbrella that he apparently used to club the guy's steamed head. Owen had taken his shoe-hinged fall, and then Waylan had been on the guy and chopping at him, the umbrella canopy printed like an atlas, so that now a Mercator projection of the world lay cleft along the umbrella pole where it had met the back of the dad's head. The father came to his feet, his face red and rainspattered. He rubbed

the back of his head. His child, who'd returned from the restroom, stood watching in wonderment until the dad snatched up his hand.

"I'd never—" the dad trailed off, nodding at Owen and motioning vaguely to the child. "Not to my boy."

Father and son disappeared among the throng of storm refugees who moved on now, probably still trying to piece together the events that had led to the crooked umbrella, the red-faced father and the waifish kid with the fast-swelling eye. The tattooed Squid Man began speaking to Waylan, but then shook his head and sauntered back to the safety of the freakhouse. The door came open, revealing the outline of Bondy's face just before it swung shut. Hard to tell how much of that she'd seen.

As Waylan turned back to the boardwalk, his brother emerged from the crowd and advanced on them with urgent steps. He'd hiked the back of his shirt over his head to stand off the rain. Goddamn Reeve, he'd only make it worse. He'd probably inform on Waylan, try to get him into some really deep shit, *e.g.* the old sibling rivalries, which were never truly forgotten. Always a residual impulse leaning hard toward fratricide. Better run him off while he still could. Waylan raised the umbrella again, but now it was Jefferson who stepped back shouting his own name and bracing his palms against the upraised umbrella.

"I saw what happened," Jefferson said. "You let me know if you need a witness. He attacked the kid first and I saw it."

Owen stood watching Jefferson with his mouth open, his eye socket puckering.

"Witness for what?" Waylan said.

"You know. In case you need somebody to testify."

"I told you to stay the hell away from me," Waylan said.

Jefferson took a few steps back, still staring at Waylan, like he couldn't believe he was being treated so badly. After a few seconds his shoulders slumped and he veered off into the crowd.

They made an infirmary of a vacant gaming booth. Owen's eye peered at him from between purple hillocks of flesh. Waylan peeked out from under the tarp and regarded the rain-smearred boardwalk, grateful that his face had come away unpunched. The whole sequence kept looping in Waylan's head, the punch-tilt-slap of Owen falling. Along the beach, dark surf yawed violently under a layer of froth. Some of the beach evacuees had left their umbrellas planted in the sand, and now the wind spun them down the beach like colored tops.

The Squid Man parted a curtain of rainwater and ducked under the tarp. He produced a cup of ice and some folded paper towels.

"Best I could find," he said. "Storm's about to close in." Then to Owen, "Hope your eye feels better, guy."

Owen nodded to show he was grateful, but not all that grateful, Waylan could tell, because at the end of the day who'd be all that grateful for the ice needed to dull the aching cheekbone that he'd never wanted punched in the first place?

"Well I bet his knuckles aren't feeling too good right about now," Waylan said. "Nor the back of his fat head."

"Yeah, I bet you're right. I just wonder why he couldn't sock that clown if he was so mad and all."

"People are funny."

"I didn't find it all that funny."

When Waylan turned back from the weather, Owen's stringy bangs were standing on end, like they were being tussled by an underwater current. His good eye became enormous, and then an electric charge gripped the air, setting Waylan's molars atingle, and the fine hair of his arms. An instant later, a sharp concussion snapped the air from his lungs. The darkened sky strobed white, countless raindrops firing like synchronized flashbulbs for an instant that was so bright Waylan blinked. When he did so he saw the world in negative for seconds afterwards, a vertical shadow dividing the white-hot sky.

The odor found them long before they even reached the balloon-popping booth. It was a smell more distinct and nauseating than anything the Gulf had ever offered up to the shore, worse even than the smell of those moldering bones. Like burning hair, but with a porcine flourish that you could sort of taste. As they came upon the scene, the lingering parkgoers kept glaring up at the clouds, like the culprit might still be harbored there. The layers of red and white canvas that formed the walls now fell about, ragged and blackened. The balloons hung like ruptured lungs or ran down the backdrop in blackened gobs. The booth's canopy roof had burned through, revealing charred lumber struts, over which gathered a weak spire of smoke. The stuffed animals hanging from the rafters beheld their torrefied landscape with eyes like fried eggs.

Owen and Waylan ventured close enough to see that the man's body was still on the concrete floor, giving off steam. That was about as close as he wanted to get. Owen looked like he might be sick, but the two of them stood watching, backing off now, as if the torched guy might lurch up from the ground, try to touch them with his electric fingers.

A policeman squatted beside the fallen man, his hat mantled in a clear plastic cover that made sizzling noises in the thinning rain. At intervals, he reached down to take the guy's pulse and then shook his head and let the arm drop.

A surly pair of EMTs finally arrived with a gurney, but after they tested the carnie's pulse their work took on a more deliberate pace. The cop moved out into the rain and urged pedestrians away. Children wailed. After a halfhearted attempt at resuscitation, the EMTs lifted the dead man onto the gaming counter and then onto a wheeled gurney. They shrouded him in a long veil already spotted with rain. Even they, the EMTs, couldn't help staring. From one end spat the two charred leather scraps that had been his boots, the heels blown out flower-like.

One by one, carnies arrived to verify the dead. They tried not to quake as they approached the gurney and drew back the sheet, tried not to turn away from their fallen partner's charnel-house grin. Some of them were already taking bold swigs of booze.

Waylan tapped Owen on the shoulder, and in silence they filed past the freak show banners, the twisted machinery of the amusement rides. Even then, if Owen had just said that people couldn't control the weather, Waylan would've agreed. But he also would've pointed out the irrefutable fact of the dead carnie, the karmic implications, the sheer strangeness of it. He knew what ideas he wanted himself to believe in, but did he have other beliefs that he wasn't even aware of? He didn't really *believe* that there was a worm living in his head, for instance, but he could feel it. And now he found himself wondering if maybe certain people—especially eccentric kids like Myles—carried such radical electrical fields that they could summon up supernatural influence over atmospheric conditions. Anyone who owned a fireplace knew something about manipulating fire—how to arrange the kindling, when to glut the flames and when to starve them. Were clouds so different?

All at once, the rain stopped.

## CHAPTER 14

This was a strange farm. The lot lay striated with dark rows of what might've been corn. He stood on a furrow that spanned from one horizon to another. To the south, a surge of sea foam. To the north, the furrows ran on indefinitely toward a stark smear that might've been snow glare. He and Sam harvested the fields, hobbled beneath the weight of tortoiseshell fruit baskets. They bent back thick green vines and cupped the full shapes beneath, turning them in the sun, the fruit-sweet air. An unfamiliar harvest. Pumpkin-sized, but shaped and colored like pomegranates. His hands were stained crimson where he'd broken their stems, and Sam began counting to see who'd picked more. Always with the ritualized competition. Well, he was clearly the superior fruit-picker, and would prove it.

Truth be told, though, he felt just a little faint. There was a vacancy in his belly that went beyond hunger, though hunger was its closest analog. At length, he kneeled down in the shade of the hedge and turned open the blade of his pocketknife. The steel slit through one fruit's rubbery rind from top to bottom in an unbroken circle. He quartered and re-quartered the textured skin. Burgundy syrup ran in thick beads that pooled at his feet. He peeled the scored segments away to reveal another layer yet. Waylan scored this layer more quickly to find yet another. He carved until he'd whittled the fruit down to the size of a crab float. He raised it and bashed it against the ground. At the core, there was a fleshy river stone which he pried out and bit. Semi-sweet, and chewy like a prune. Before Waylan could finish the last bite, she was on him, screaming and clawing at his eyes. Waylan felt his face flush with shame. His last bite began to twitch and squirm in his mouth. It coiled around his tongue. He spat a pool of fruit slurry that bubbled, then drew itself into a column. The pulpy mess finally cured into a burgundy candle that threw dim



red light on the hedge rows, revealing the outlines of runic characters he couldn't remember when he woke up.

The warning was clear enough: eat no questionable fruits. Still, he'd never fall back asleep, not after one of those dreams. He sipped a single drop of steaming coffee and dumped more milk into the heat-crazed cup. A squat moon lorded over the flat world framed in the window. Balthazar sprawled below on his elbows, his chin raised just above the floor.

"Bad dreams," he told the hound. "*Bad.*"

Balthazar listed onto his flank and whined.

"You should've seen him, Zar. Fried from stem to stern. Could've struck anyone. Why him?"

Waylan wagged a finger at the muted mini TV that hung from the kitchen ceiling. The caption noted a fatal lightning strike and flashed a grainy photograph of the dead carnie. Bannered at the bottom of the screen were the man's name and the details of his humble funeral service. The report cut to footage of the smoldering canvas, molten balloons, veiled gurney.

"I was there," Waylan whispered. "I saw it."

He felt Sam's hand warm at his neck and he turned his head to kiss the delicate ridges of her knuckles. She looked pleasant and sleepy, a brief shudder as she gathered the parted robe about her otherwise naked body. She selected an orange from the refrigerator and placed it on a wooden cutting board. Waylan groaned quietly. She set a square china dish between them, two sliced fruit quarters for Waylan, who tasted something sour rising in his throat.

"All this exposure to death," she said. "Can't be good for you."

"You just wonder why him, you know? All those folks on the boardwalk and blammo, dead carnie. They say bad luck follows people. Well it sure as hell follows that Myles kid."

“Why him?” she said, nose wiggling, losing patience.

“Saw him tossing darts not an hour before it happened. Had a nasty altercation with that carnie before he was struck. Maybe Myles meant it to happen.”

“Nobody controls the weather, Waylan.”

“It was him who left that sculpture of the fat lady on the doorstep, wasn’t it?”

Sam shrugged, suppressing a yawn. “That would sort of make sense. Looks like something he might make.”

“I don’t like it. What if he’s put some kind of curse on it?”

“You afraid it’s actually going to make me fat?”

“I just think it’s creepy.”

“We should get some sleep.” She regarded the untouched fruit and sighed. “I guess I don’t have much of an appetite either.” She sat down across from him, tested a smile. Gently, she took up his wrists. Waylan ground his teeth and looked into her eyes. “Talk,” she said.

He was still trying to articulate the odor of burnt pork rinds and cheese that had greeted him at the balloon booth when Sam stood to retch over the sink. Waylan made sure to keep her hair clear of her mouth as he apologized. When she had more or less recovered, she gathered her robe and walked back to the bedroom, Waylan following her to the door, offering more apologies.

The next news story featured a renovated version of the local museum, which was downtown, near the beach. The reporter introduced Connie the archaeologist as the area’s leading expert on the legendary Jenkins brothers, whom she’d recently placed on display. Connie smiled into the camera and rambled on about her forthcoming Jenkins brothers biography.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Waylan told the hound. “Just hope she’ll offer a faithful account, that’s all.”

The camera panned over the exhibit. The reformatted Jenkinses stood before an Old West sunset rendered in paint, tumbleweeds poised between them like ottomans. The set-up couldn’t have been hokier. A prop rattlesnake coiled at their feet, malevolent clock spring. One brother’s arm rested on a lacquered Conestoga wagon, but it occurred to Waylan that he’d never read of them traveling by wagon—*ever*. They rode horses, and he knew that Connie knew as much, which meant she’d sprung for wagons out of some cynical desire to feed the public their own misconceptions.

The reporter explained that the Jenkinses’ bones had been reinforced with resin. Layer by layer, sculptors had given them foam latex flesh and muscles. They’d sculpted the Jenkinses’ faces according to known photographs and descriptions, down to the millimeter, every muscle fiber named, measured, and accounted for, if you believed what they said.

The Jenkinses might have been choir men in costume, cheeks rosy and unscarred. Schoolchildren milled about the exhibit, baring plastic gold smiles to the camera and drinking from polystyrene moonshine jugs marked with triple Xs. Connie was making a full-on mockery of the Old West.

Waylan felt like crying, but the medication made it difficult to work up proper tears.

## CHAPTER 15

Later that April, there were rumors of another fatal lightning strike. This time a Des Moines tourist gone fearless on hard drink. He'd clambered up the mast of a Cape Dory and hung there like a crazed nautical ornament to call on the approach of a squall, only to drop rigid and smoking, lost to less than two fathoms of baywater. Folks claimed it wasn't the lightning that finally killed him but the subsequent drowning, his crew too stunned and rummy to retrieve him in time.

Later that month, a pack of squid drowned a ten-year-old boy who tumbled from a fishing boat as it motored in from an unfruitful day of bill fishing. Waylan coasted past the cemetery on his bicycle, his eyes drawn to the tearful survivors, tiny casket waiting to be fed to the ground. Dozens of small children watched over the ceremony, sober and petulant in their drab suits, sour little reiterations of their parents, whose hands they wrung, whose pants and dresses were blotted with their tears, understanding that they too would die. Waylan shook his head and pedaled on. Someone should've prepared them for this, someone should've told them. Mortality. Hell of an idea to drop on the mind of a child.

## CHAPTER 16

May 8<sup>th</sup> was Reeve's birthday—would've been Reeve's birthday, were he present to celebrate, which he probably wouldn't be, since he was probably dead, and probably had been so for several years.

Waylan drove past narrow pines and oak scrub and colorless barrens, the landscape a madman's pastiche of topographies, consistent only in its submission to a relentless sun that was rumored to curve roof shingles and start fires where it fell through round windows. Folks' milk expired before it crossed the parking lot. Rival raccoon families warred over neighborhood swimming pools. That kind of heat.

One birthday past—Waylan had trouble distinguishing one year from another—Reeve had requested a small inflatable pool, and he and Waylan had loaded it with ice and spent their afternoons soaking. It could barely fit the two of them at once. They'd wallow in the water for a while and then just lie there, surrendering to the heat. Inspired by a Royal Caribbean commercial, Waylan added a few heaping scoops of Kool-Aid powder which, to his credit, succeeded in dyeing the water a more appealing Caribbean blue, but with the unintended side effect of staining their skin. Their mother nearly stroked out when she checked them out through the window and saw that they'd gone that shade of lit butane that non-breathers tend to get.

He was trying to stay grounded in the present, to be aware and live with intention, as per Dr. Jable's directions. In these hot dragonfly days, new monuments were coming into position as if voided from the parched ground. The steel cranes turning their intricate gears, lifting structures from the dust—here a new church of brick, there another bank, there a grocery store, a drive-through restaurant, a dollar store. Progress, sort of.

Waylan glared at the station wagon's dashboard and torqued a silver knob. Hot air boiled from the vents and he cursed, sweat spraying from his lips. Along the shoulder, he spotted a highway walker so familiar he wiped his eyes and braked. Tires squalled behind him and he eyed the mirror in time to see the driver of a truck wrenching the wheel, her face dark behind glass. The truck swerved and came to a stop beside him. Its passenger-side window inched open and the driver howled out an unbroken spate of invectives begun midstream, like this truck freighted the obscenities of an entire nation, venting them as needed.

When Waylan looked back into the mirror his brother stood watching him from the road shoulder. Waylan got the strangest impression that Reeve *expected* a birthday cake. It was spelled in his slouching posture—that Waylan was supposed to be carrying a cake at this particular point of time, having readied himself at any moment to deploy it, it being Reeve's birthday and all. *Make with the cake, already*, Reeve would be saying. *Here. Now*. Wasn't that just like him?

Waylan laid a palm on the shifter and briefly considered rolling it to *R*. Where did Reeve get off expecting cake? What had he done to deserve cake? Waylan couldn't even make it through a fishing trip these days without being upbraided, and he figured enough was enough. Waylan waved at him, tried to beckon him inside, but Reeve just stood there beside the highway, shabby inside Waylan's clothes. Reeve spat on the asphalt, probably indignant about his standing there cakeless in the heat and the stalled traffic. At length, he shook his head accusingly and took a step backward, like, *Don't bother, I don't care about cake anyway*. Reeve didn't have to say a word. Waylan knew Reeve was shaming him because Waylan hadn't switched channels from *Twin Peaks* to the weather report. And that kind of thinking really got Waylan's goat.

“You'd have just gone fishing anyway,” Waylan screamed.

He closed his eyes and groaned. The heat was poaching his brain, the fog expanding inside his skull again, but superheated this time, fried butter mist. When he opened his eyes, he saw that it was only Jefferson rooted to the road shoulder. He had Reeve's blue eyes and the same slouching shoulders, which proved Waylan wasn't crazy for confusing the two of them. On the other hand, Waylan was getting tired of running into Jefferson all the time. Did the guy follow him around all day or what? A sharp citric burn flared up in Waylan's belly and passed into his bloodstream, lifting a fresh glaze of to the skin of his brow. Wasn't fair that this guy could go on living and being tiresome while certain others could only stay dead.

Waylan bashed the steering column with his fist, producing a sustained honk. He cleared the sweat from his face and punched the A/C console good and square. The silver knob popped off with a sharp crack and rolled between the seats. Everything was plastic these days. Dashboard couldn't even take a decent punch. The sour blood was spreading to Waylan's face, feeding into the greater tributaries of rage until he had a mighty river of hot, chemical wrath pumping around in his system. Felt sort of refreshing, the first sip of wine after a period of abstention.

He dropped the gearshift into *R* and cut the wheel toward the road shoulder, then he flattened the gas pedal. He'd make this Reeve-Jefferson guy disappear. Not kill him, *per se*, just sort of rub him out of existence, like the cartoons where they dropped an anvil on a villain who afterward sort of just de-existed. The car veered backwards and onto the shoulder with a sickening lurch, inspiring further outrage from the stopped drivers, and lots of honking. In the mirror, Reeve-Jefferson or Jefferson-Reeve or whoever he was bolted across the road shoulder and tumbled through a briar thicket. When he pulled himself upright again, he had a series of red chevrons cut into his neck and face. He headed north along the shoulder, didn't look back.

Waylan watched until Reeve-Jefferson miniaturized in the windowglass. He wasn't angry anymore, but some part of him must've stalled there with the car. His hand, for example, refused to move the station wagon's gearshift to *D*. He tried, but the signal got lost somewhere near the elbow. His arm refused to take part in any sort of operation that might end in a forward course.

Traffic was really backing up now, even though he was now stopped on the shoulder and they could get around him. Maybe they didn't trust him, still expecting that he might dart out onto the highway. The cars made a loosely-bound tapeworm set to prey upon the wavering road. They'd start drawing up its nutrients. The nearest drivers sounded their horns, told Waylan off with all the usual hand gestures. More impatient drivers slowed a bit on the approach so they could punch the gas as they passed, making their engines howl. One guy pulled onto the shoulder behind Waylan and exited his car to glare at Waylan through the side window. He pointed a finger, called Waylan a piece of Dixieland trash. Then he called Waylan a goat-fucker. He rapped on the glass, offered to break Waylan's jaw.

Waylan clawed his hair, a tickle developing in the bottom floor of his brain. That was probably the worm, which could contract and elongate accordion-wise, making itself nearly undetectable. Waylan took a deep breath, cooler blood flooding to his cheeks.

Wasn't like he would've actually run Jefferson-Reeve over. But sure, maybe it was time to talk to Dr. Jable. He'd explain the incident to her and she could decide what was best. Fair enough. Waylan uncapped his medicine bottle and shook out a single pill with practiced grace. He swallowed it with a dry gulp.

"Next chance I get," he told the empty car.



Meanwhile, he still had the issue of *D* to solve. Would it be better to wait for the traffic to thin out and drive to the lot in *R* instead? It was only another mile or so. Maybe he could kind of beat the system that way, travel forward without traveling forward.

He tried to move the gearshift down just one notch, into *R*, and his hand obeyed. He might get some funny looks, but it would get him to the lot, no problem.

#

Through the rear window of the station wagon, the construction site puckered like an open wound, at the center of which swarmed mustard-colored excavators. The lot was rigged for fresh water and sewage now, pipework laid bare in the raw ground like a rudimentary nervous system. The first of two concrete trucks was pouring out the foundation, its bulbous mixer churning a shapeless gruel that would pour out and cure into timeless artifacts, forms that might outlast their makers. Here was a shot at a kind of poor man's immortality.

It'd been rumored by Owen that this was also Prescott's last proper construction job—that when the excavation was finished, Prescott would focus his resources on building the restaurant. Waylan could already imagine the place's overcooked pirate aesthetic taking form in what passed for Prescott's mind. He'd make the place scream *PIRATE!* like a ransom victim, the waitstaff forced to employ bad swashbuckling accents as they tottered around on their campy peg legs, stuffed parrots pinned to their shoulders. There'd almost certainly be eye patches.

“If this isn't turning into the sloppiest shit storm I've ever seen,” Prescott said, sidling up next to Waylan. Prescott wore a dull red hardhat which rode too high, so that he was forever trying to press it back down. He struck Waylan's chest with a sweaty roll of schematics. “I've damn near had to pay off the whole of the town save the dumpkeeper, and he spared me only because the son of a bitch is too dumb to know he could exploit me too.”

“You sure you want to be pouring the building foundation before the parking lot?”

Waylan said, feigning concentration. “I’ve just never seen it done this way.”

“Right, but we’re not pouring a concrete lot, are we?” Prescott gave Waylan his conspiratorial smile. “No, I’m going to truck in some oyster shells if I can get them. If not oyster shells, some of that chalky gravel. Give it more of a homey feel, right partner?”

Waylan nodded. He’d already decided he didn’t want to eat at his boss’s restaurant any more often than he had to.

“Why not hop in that excavator and clear me some brush,” Prescott said. “We want this place to look presentable. An artist such as you can appreciate that, right? What with all those little couch doilies and craft pictures you’ve been selling.”

Waylan couldn’t help feeling confused, like his spirit had been vacuumed into the wrong body, the wrong life. Prescott pressed his hardhat back into position and jabbed at Waylan’s gut with the rolled prints.

“Just breaking your balloons there, partner.” Prescott stomped off for the foundation site, still holding his paper scepter. As he strode about, Prescott shouted profanities and commands to the rumbling excavators, a hatted St. Francis of the oil age who could commune with the machines and bend their wills.

Owen strolled up to Waylan, grinning for no good reason.

“You’d almost think the fool knows what he’s doing,” Waylan said. “Who knows, he might actually get this one right.”

Owen rolled his eyes. The thin purple corona of a bruise still colored one cheekbone.

“On the bright side, the longer he keeps up with this restaurant junk, the longer he’ll be out of our hair. Maybe we can actually build up a crew and start getting some decent jobs.”

Owen squinted. “You must be nutty,” he said.

“I must?”

“He’s done with construction. Everybody knows that. What he wants is people to help run Lafitte’s.”

“So you think he’s just going to lay us off? He’d never do that, you imbecile.”

“No, he wouldn’t. The man doesn’t trust anyone he doesn’t already know. What he’s going to do is dress us up in pirate hats and have us serve hamburgers.”

“How many goddamn burger stands does he figure this town needs, anyway?”

“He’s already asked me if I can do kitchen work, and he mentioned you’re handy on the grill.”

“Well what’d you tell him?”

“I told him ‘Yes.’”

“Well goddamn it, Owen.” Waylan bit his lip. What was the worth of his own dignity at this point? No easy question. He tried to imagine his words, how he might make a case so eloquent that Prescott would be swayed. It hadn’t once occurred to Waylan that Prescott actually *knew* he was bad at the construction racket, and wasn’t comfortable with ineptitude. “He’s smart enough to know where he’s not smart,” Waylan finally said.

Owen nodded, and even though he was smiling, Waylan thought this time it might be out of pity. Where had that come from?—that *sorry-you’re-so-damn-stupid* expression of Owen’s? He didn’t like the way any of this was wafting.

Later, Waylan and Owen watched as Prescott offered Connie a hardhat like it was a bowl of rose petals. His way of welcoming her to the fold, maybe. They exchanged words, Connie

examining the inside of the hardhat, trying to explain something. Prescott snatched it away, flung it down. He cursed and stomped at the ground.

“Must’ve had a roach in it,” Waylan said.

“Are those two screwing or what, Waylan?”

“Best I can figure.”

Owen swallowed hard, like he could taste this news. “What for?”

“Maybe he thinks he’ll get smarter screwing smarter women, and maybe she likes having him around to remind her that she’s smart.”

“Doesn’t seem like he’s gotten any smarter. Not to me.”

Owen walked over to one of the work trucks to pick out a shovel. Waylan boarded the excavator and joined the swarming machines. He felt like a surgeon working in reverse as he laved soil over the colored water pipes, folding them into the earth. Already, he could imagine the gaudy shape of Prescott’s American Dream swelling up out of the ground, tumor-swift. The walls loaded up with many yard sales’ worth of pirate crap, the air for miles around slick with the smell overcooked lard, burger wrappers blowing loose and swirling into the creek. What would the Jenkins brothers have to say about that?—their bloody frontier white-washed and refigured as strip malls and gimmicky restaurants. Every store a vacuum chamber fitted with automatic doors, interiors circulating canned weather, speakers pouring out corporate-vetted tunes, and surrounding it all, the refineries crafted of lead and wire. Would it enrage these brothers to find themselves exhumed and relocated to Connie’s tasteless museum, or would they take company with the reconstructed gauchos and outlaws, trading belts of moonshine and chronicles of spilled blood?

*There used to be more stars, they'd say. There used to be more stars and there were parts of this world yet unmapped and men spent long and lonely years navigating seas by the cold light of constellations. Tallied each day above ground with a hatch mark on the mast. And landowners along American rivers once sustained themselves and their fellows with corn, squash, peas, tubers. Their fruit orchards sweetened the air on summer nights.*

Looking out over the construction site, Waylan considered the soil, how it pervaded his life. He'd heard of pregnant women who'd sit in their yards and spoon clay into their mouths for the minerals. He imagined Sam crouched likewise, the earth leavening inside her. The same earth that caked the treads of his shoes, gathered beneath his fingernails, settled into his hair, his lungs. The earth followed him, told his whereabouts. He ate the earth, shit the earth, and he felt sure that if he sliced his finger, he'd bleed it.

#

Mired in his dingy sheets, Waylan's father gawked at his surroundings like the walls of his own house were alien to him. Waylan's eyes roamed over the surfaces of picture frames that stood facing outward, toward the walls. There were scattered piles of cogs and rods, empty glasses, overturned pill bottles poised like buoys over their spilled contents, plates of fossilized food residues and motley fortresses of chicken bone. His father, the absent-minded clock-master. Every year he got worse.

Waylan seated himself in a hardwood chair and folded his hands. He smiled sadly over the cluttered room like he was detached from it, a clergyman set to confer a blessing over a damned residence. Better that way. You had to distance yourself if you wanted to survive someone's collapse, had to view it from a high orbit.

“Alright, then,” his father muttered. “I know why you came.” Incredible. Even with all the mood-elevating chemicals that were surging around inside him, you could still catch that edge of irritation.

“Came to check on you.”

“You my doctor?”

His father’s head and torso levered up from the bed like a tree felled in reverse. With nimble fingers, he picked an array of pills from the scattered and multi-colored mounds. There were no water glasses in reaching distance, so he downed them with a dry gulping noise and settled back onto the bed.

“I could’ve brought you a glass of water, Dad.”

“Didn’t ask for any glass of waterdad.”

Waylan turned away and rotated a few of the pictures to face inward. “Just came to tell you Sam’s pregnant.” He was fishing for one of his father’s outbursts of incredulous profanity, like his celebrated, *What in the name of dick-dangling Christ?* Also, Waylan just liked the thrill of telling such a bald lie.

His father nodded and blew air through his mouth, his cheeks billowing. Harder to get a rise out of him these days. He poked through pools of spilled medicine, speechless at the thought of being grandfathered, just like Waylan had always suspected. He’d suffer no further expansion of the Dranger family tree. Let it die, an experiment that failed the day Reeve disappeared.

“That was a joke, Dad. You know that, right?”

The old man winced. “Why ain’t I laughing?”

“You don’t find that funny? Your nutbag son having a kid of his own.”

“No worse off than the rest of us nutbags. You think yours is a special case?”

“When was the last time you left the house?”

“I leave it plenty. Might be leaving it in another minute or two if you don’t leave first.”

“So you say.”

Waylan tugged a frayed cord and the yellowed blinds over his father’s bed clattered and raced up the glass, turning out clumps of dust as they neared the headrail. The feeble sunlight that ventured through gave sharper nuance to the sad tableau, his father’s face yellowed and pined with stiff hair. As if sensing Waylan’s thoughts, his father held the sheets up to his reprobate face. Waylan was enjoying the casual arrogance that the ambulatory tend to hold over the bedded.

“How old would he have been, Waylan?”

Waylan traced a figure eight on the dirty windowglass, which framed his father’s shabby peach and persimmon orchards. One summer when he and Reeve were boys, the persimmons had ripened early. He and Reeve had warred through the first week of September with the fallen fruit, their shirts smeared and stinking with pulp. He remembered how the yard hummed with hornets, the ground glazed with brown jelly. Now the orchards were barren and weedy, their branches crowded with crows.

“Twenty-one,” Waylan said. “Would’ve had his first legal drink today.”

“Well happy birthday, Reeve. We’re not going to sing to him are we? Not that I’m opposed, it’s just I don’t think he’d appreciate it.”

“What about you? How you feeling this week?”

“Feels like somebody handcuffed my saggy ass to a merry-go-round that just goes faster and faster.” He scratched along his hairline. “But I can’t keep blaming my mistakes on what happened to your brother.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Anyway, what news do you hear these days?”

“From Reeve?” He could feel the tears building up.

“No son, not from Reeve. From your mother.”

“Guess I hear about as much as you do. You get a check this month?”

“We never took you or Reeve to a day of church in your lives,” he said, head shaking, jowls bulldogging. “I think about that sometimes.”

“That’s not true,” Waylan said. “You took us to a few services when we were younger. You just don’t remember.”

His father nodded, overcome by a profound sadness. He turned onto his side, facing away from Waylan, and brought the covers around his head to make a kind of parka. Waylan knew his father well enough to understand that he’d speak no more, that for him despair was a downhill train ride that only permitted one passenger at a time. Everyone had a system.

On the dresser stood the sloop Waylan and Reeve had crafted with their father when they were children. Waylan rubbed the grime from the stern to see where they signed their names in faint and untrained letters. Dust webbed the delicate rigging, the jibs and squared topsail shriven and yellowed in the windowlight. The vessel’s holds were stuffed with coins, thimbles, old jewelry. Waylan tore a match from one of the loose matchbooks strewn in its hull. Using his pocketknife, he levered apart the papery layers until he’d fashioned a stick figure. When he left, it stood at the ship’s prow. A little something to cheer up the old man, to show him that someone still captained the ship. Waylan didn’t believe in that kind of thing, of course. But it was important to him that his father did.



## CHAPTER 17

The clock was as good as sold. Bondy, who carried a head full of names, had referred tonight's buyer, and since the guy was from Manchester, Waylan figured there was a great chance he'd encountered similar units. Waylan excelled at what he liked to think of as the nostalgia sell. Inspire wistful memories of home-sweet-home and folks were helpless.

He sat in the den picking at his rescued guitar and watching through the window, half a moon discarded out there in the darkness like a broken pill. He noted the time as it appeared on a broad face of the Vitascope clock. Six o'clock. Waylan played on.

They'd salvaged the ruined clock from a church sale, where it sat at the bottom of a pine crate in the company of old telephones, cameras, and obscure household artifacts he couldn't identify, each of them stained with the same red dust. This was a special clock. Its oversized Bakelite body was flat-faced and rounded off like the mailboxes he'd seen downtown as a boy. Its dial gave the time in a full circle of Roman numerals, the hands as well as the entire clock mechanism having been torn out. He knew that the clock's interior was designed to stage a mechanized clipper ship that would pitch up and down on a sculpted blue sea, while overhead a painted sky lit by a rotating celluloid drum rolled from sunset to sunrise every ten minutes. But this clock's window had been smashed out, its clipper ship pried from its cam. Still, the clock was so ridiculous that he loved it the instant he saw it.

Sam had shaken her head at him as he waited in line to pay. "It says Isle of Man on the back," she said.

"Yes it does."

"So it's wired for European voltage."

He bought it anyway and stowed it on the shelf of the utility room. For months, he hunted broken clocks at thrift stores, rummage sales. He filled drawers with polished brass gears and began arranging them on wax paper.

Waylan had a theory that all artifacts kept time. Even a flawed clock reported some version of the time, and who could say it was wrong? Maybe such a clock detected the presence of one of those alternate universes that ran at a different tempo. And if the tempo theory were true, then maybe certain people could push the tempo or make it lag in similar fashion, deranged folks tapping into radical mental frequencies that the categorically sane only stumbled upon in lambent blips and dashes. He decided that only the profoundly insane could confront reality for whatever it was. What else but total, paralyzing clarity could drive a person to finally swing home the armored door of an underground bunker against the threat of CIA agents with mind control, or to spend their hard-earned on bigfoot expeditions, or appear on national television to share stories about extra-terrestrials who were—if you believed what they told millions of viewers—unduly fascinated with the human anus?

Waylan had succeeded. He'd found a replacement for the Vitascope clock's motor and power supply. He spent days removing and refurbishing the clock stage and its ocean-gone-desert. The brown Bakelite casing had worn in patches, and he did what he could to match the shade with acrylic paints.

He smiled now as he hefted the clock into the den, set it on a cluttered coffee table, where it sat like a novelty breadbox. He wasn't sure that he'd ever complete anything as beautiful as this timepiece. He dimmed the lights overhead and snaked the plug into the outlet. The painted sky fired through the glass, surprising and life-like. Stars winked and dimmed. Brass and marble planets and moons swung on their armatures and gave back the light of a concealed lamp, a silent

trundling of the heavenly bodies. Waylan observed these automata and felt a pang of sadness at the thought of losing the clock. The elegance of the cosmos felt so reassuring, everything fixed neatly under glass and securely pinioned, never threatening to break orbit and rifle across the floor.

He heard the front door creak open, and then the jingle of Balthazar's collar. Sam angled her head through the doorway.

"Where were you?" he said.

"I was out." Her eyes were on the clock. "Very impressive," she said.

"I'm sure you'll find a way to outdo it."

"Can you handle a sale this time or you want me to play cashier?"

"I think I can handle it."

"Promise you won't stand around stammering and drinking water?"

"Sam."

"Sorry, just wanted to make sure. You're looking better."

"I'm feeling better."

And he was. It was always a relief to get through Reeve's birthday without actually having to speak to him.

He kept strumming his ramshackle guitar, the strings warbling out of tune and slowly unraveling. Metal burrs gnashed his fingertips, but he kept playing. Sam listened for just a moment before retreating to the bedroom.

Waylan was still playing when the doorbell rang. This buyer didn't look so nervous to step inside, and as he entered the den, he palmed his derby hat and knelt before the clock like

he'd pray. He attended a complete cycle of the mechanical heavens, scarcely blinking. Waylan was already thinking he should've quoted a higher asking price. Too late, too late.

"My father kept one when I was a little boy," the guy said. "But it housed a clipper ship on the ocean. It was nowhere near this complex."

"You're from the UK, aren't you?" Waylan said. "You've probably seen quite a few of these."

"I remember watching the sky change, but I'll be blasted if I can remember the sun flaring quite like that."

"I've taken some liberties," Waylan said.

"How—how'd you get the sky to do that?"

"You just have to use the right paint." You had to add the right amount of titanium flake, too, and sometimes a thin nitrocellulose lacquer glaze, but of course he wasn't say going to say all of that. People were happier not knowing.

"But I've never seen one with an orrery. Are you telling me you crafted an orrery from scratch?"

"Didn't feel like hunting around for another clipper ship. They're not easy to find."

"Sir I'll have it," the man said, eyes shining. "You realize these are worth at least twice what you're asking, do you?"

"I've taken some liberties. This one's not original anymore."

"No it's not. But I'll have it all the same."

Sam returned from the bedroom just as Waylan was showing the buyer out the door. Waylan wondered how much of himself he was sending out the door along with the clock. He was going to miss tracking the clock's electric skies. He counted the bills and offered them to

Sam, who let the money fan out on the kitchen table. She gathered them up, paid them through her fingers like she still wasn't convinced they were real.

“Between the both of us it's turning into a nice bit of money,” he said. “They might be willing to pay even more in a big city. We might make something of ourselves. See a bit of the world.”

Her arm fell against the table and the bills sloughed in a small heap.

“That's not how it works. Especially not in the fancy cities I know you're keen on. There's no place for us on Fifth Avenue. They'd run us off.”

“We don't know that.”

“No shame in keeping it local,” Sam said. “I wish you'd understand that.”

She walked to the bedroom carrying the thin stack of bills. Moments later, Waylan could hear the soft ticking as she dialed in the combination to the safe they kept under their bed.

## CHAPTER 18

The drive was quiet, only the occasional rattle and pop of her bicycle chain. *Don't bother knocking*, Bondy had messaged. *I'll be on the porch, so just come right in.*

The flimsy white arbor before Bondy's door stood like the gateway to a city overtaken with honeysuckle. They had only ever met near the beach, or at the occasional wine tasting, and the prospect of finally seeing Bondy's place rushed her heart. Bondy probably expected her to use the gate, but she'd already made her mind up to go inside. If Bondy asked, she could always feign ignorance. Sam peeled open the wrought iron frame of a patched-up screen door. The painted wood underneath had started to chip. She liked doors, especially the ones that were well-used, panels darkened where decades of knuckles had fallen, brass doorknobs twisted dull. Bondy's house had the strangest knob she'd ever seen—a grasping brass hand that waited to be shaken, so that in order to open it you first had to agree to a silent contract of some kind.

Inside, it smelled of paraffin. An unfinished wax arm draped over a coffee table. A pair of costume eyemasks hung from pins stuck into a wall that was decorated with new photography Bondy had taken down in Plant City, Florida, where she paid white college students to wear business suits and pick tomatoes among migrant workers while she snapped pictures. The college kids were hunched and sweaty in the pictures. Some had been photographed while wiping their faces or shielding their eyes from the sun. Sam figured the shots were meant to generate some kind of statement on labor relations, or maybe classism. Something about the juxtaposition between the slick suits and the shabby clothes of the migrants made her uncomfortable, and she figured that meant the prints were significant. A blender sat on the kitchen counter, its pitcher loaded with plaster of Paris. On the windowsill, a line of mason jars filled with turbid water and stained brushes. Bondy's workshop. There was so more life here than there was in the room Sam

and Waylan used. Bondy's plaster was still wet, and the brushes were ready for use. Unlike Waylan, Bondy didn't have to wait for the ocean to offer her something to work on. She created from nothing—a blank canvas, a batch of plaster.

They sat on back patio under a citronella lamp and drank wine that smacked of vinegar, the night insects working up their broken chorus, the rickety glass table between them topped with tea candles. They spoke very little, watching the ragged dark shapes of bats dip and feint overhead.

"I'm coming to watch you at Azar's," Sam said. "Like it or not."

"I'd be embarrassed," Bondy said, swirling her wine.

"You perform for strangers. Why not me?"

"It's easier with strangers."

"I want to see you dance."

After she finished her first glass, Bondy went inside and stayed there for a long time. Sam listened to frogs chirp and tried to pinpoint their location in the yard. Bondy came out wearing her performance tights. Her shirt had two sleeves on the right side, one of them occupied by a plaster arm. In her left arm, she carried a purple boom box.

Sam cheered, and Bondy shook her head like she was embarrassed. She set the boom box on the glass table, but pointed the speakers away from Sam and out toward the yard. Bondy punched a series of buttons, squinting against the candle light, and then backed off into the grass. A flute-heavy instrumental cued up, lilting in six-eight time. Bondy began dancing, and the motion of it spoke to Sam of a freedom she'd always wanted to have, though she knew her body couldn't dance the way Bondy's danced. For such a tall woman, Bondy was very well-proportioned, and she never once moved out of time with the music. Sam might've expected that.

What she hadn't expected was the power of that third arm. The limb itself was perverse, something that shouldn't be beautiful, shouldn't move so well, like flesh and bone, only better, Bondy's entire body manipulated by a masterful puppeteer. When Bondy straightened her back, her shirt rode up over her midriff, revealing the octopus tattoo, which rippled in sympathy with her taut belly. What it was: Bondy danced as if she didn't really care that you were there watching her. Your presence bordered on hypothetical. Sam loved it, the loss of self. She knew that Bondy didn't need her approval, and Sam's scalp tingled with envy. Sam could've watched them both dance all night, the lady and the octopus, but as the flute music faded out, Bondy sat down at the table and poured herself another glass of wine.

"You're incredible," Sam said.

"Beats washing dishes," Bondy said.

Overhead, bats jigsawed the sky. A breeze gathered and then stalled, offering traces of honeysuckle. The silence between them was spreading, even the insects falling off. After a few minutes, Bondy reached across and fetched Sam's hand. She gave it a sporting squeeze.

"We should go out."

Sam frowned, itched her nose. She'd have to be at the office by eight in the morning, as usual. She shouldn't go out. She really shouldn't. But Bondy's hand felt warm, and Sam was hoping that the next time Bondy did the Austin circuit, she might want to take Sam along.

#

The bar—Ugly Mug's, a local favorite—was small and crowded with drinkers as immobile as the stools on which they perched. Beaverboard walls pinned with pictures of what might have been younger, thinner versions of the very same people who now sat drinking. She'd always been charmed by this smoky little clubhouse. Dirty ceiling fans struggled to turn the



bread-warm air, ripping great smoky ribbons from the ends of lit cigarettes. Sam and Bondy chose beers from a laminated drink menu and watched the bartender shake his glossy head at each choice until they finally named something in stock.

“What was it we ordered?” Sam said, drawing off a swallow that tasted like burnt acorns.

“Walnut-toasted such and such,” Bondy said.

Someone scratched a shot at the pool table and cursed.

Bondy leaned in close to Sam. “You know that fella?” she said, indicating his direction with a jerk of her neck. Sam was sure she recognized the man, though she couldn’t quite place him. He had Waylan’s slouched posture, and even though his skin had more wrinkles, he seemed younger, his hands over-large, like he was still growing into his frame. Red slash-marks marked his neck, like he’d been noosed by an angry cat.

“Feel like I’ve seen him around,” Sam said.

“Well he’s fixing to stare-fuck a hole in the both of us.” The rest Bondy muttered under her breath so low that Sam couldn’t make out the words, only the embittered tone. She hated when Bondy got like this. Protective and jealous at once, like Sam was a raw gemstone that Bondy had salvaged from a dumpster, and now she wanted it all to herself, and credit for finding it. Was Bondy convinced that she and Sam were a *thing*?—already? The whole point of Bondy was supposed to be that she was new and fun—like the art galleries, like the dancing and the octopus tattoo.

Sam met eyes with the man, who folded his hands and feigned interest in the colored lights dazzling the lacquered surface of the bar.

“Now all of a sudden he’s the shy type,” Bondy said. “Figures.”

“Maybe we should ask what he wants.”

“Bet you the sky he wants to get between your legs.”

“Well I’m going to find out just as soon as I finish this,” she said, taking a drink. True, she didn’t really care to know this guy with his over-determined cheekbones, but maybe it would remind Bondy that Sam could do what she wanted, art circuits be damned. Sam took another big drink and then waved him over. He smiled sheepishly and loosened his collar as he sat down.

“I know Waylan,” he said, “and I figured you must be Sam since I’ve seen you around town with him.” Good. He got straight to the point, didn’t play around acting ignorant.

“How do you know Waylan?”

“I’m Jefferson,” he said. Sam turned to Bondy, who looked as confused as Sam felt. Jefferson snorted. “He must’ve mentioned me.”

“Not to me,” Sam said.

“Hell, we might be family,” Jefferson said.

“How do you figure that?” Sam said.

Jefferson leaned in close. “We might be brothers is what,” he whispered.

“Oh, bullshit,” Bondy said, freshly-tweezed eyebrows scrunching. “Don’t you dare get him started again on Reeve.”

“Relax,” Jefferson said. “I’m not trying to cheat anybody. Waylan—well, he tried to run me down in his station wagon the other day.” He pointed out the slashes across his neck and jaw, like that might validate his story.

“That doesn’t sound like Waylan,” Sam said. “He’s more the type would harm himself before he would someone else.”

“Well, imagine my relief,” Jefferson said, glaring at them. “I said he tried to run me over.” His face was staining, the little slashes disappearing against a deeper welter of red.

“Waylan’s also the sort where if he really had decided to run you over, you wouldn’t be here to report it,” Sam said.

“I think you’re missing my central concern,” Jefferson nearly shouted. “Point is, why do it all, whether it was for real or for pretend or for a goddamn practical joke?”

Bondy cleared her throat to get Sam’s attention, and when that didn’t work she excused herself to the restroom, which sat outside and apart from the squat bar, the door marked with a carved quarter moon. The production was in full swing now. Fine. Let her sulk in the gross bathroom. Let her cool down.

“I’ve seen you around town,” Sam said. “Haven’t I?”

“Maybe so. I’m sorry to say I’ve been to your house without you even knowing it, not that it was me who wanted to keep you in the dark.”

“Prove it.”

“Roulette wheel,” he said, like he was sad to prove himself right.

Sam took a drink of beer, which had lost its bite.

“I told you I don’t mean any ill will,” Jefferson said. “Waylan showed me kindness. I just want us to be in good stead.”

Sam’s beer glass was empty, the walls webbed with yeasty froth. So Jefferson had seen the inside of her house, had maybe sat on their sofa, drunk from their glasses, seen their work. When had that happened, and when was Waylan planning to tell her? She liked that he was opening up to someone, but she still wasn’t sure about this Jefferson guy. He didn’t squint. His eyes didn’t hold you in judgment like Waylan’s and Bondy’s did, but sometimes when he spoke it sounded like he was reading from a script. Better to distract him until she’d decided whether or not he could be trusted.

“Want to hear an old psychiatry joke?” she said.

Jefferson tilted forward to hear.

“There’s this guy who’s convinced he’s made out of corn,” Sam began.

As Sam was finishing the joke, Bondy came back from the bathroom and walked over to the bartender. She was paying their tabs, a final flourish to show Sam that it was leaving time. Oh well. Easier to just leave rather than making a scene. Jefferson was probably getting a weird enough impression as it was.

When she and Bondy stepped out, Jefferson was still perched on his barstool, nodding along like he was trying to archive what all had been said.

“Don’t be a stranger,” he called after Sam.

They returned to Bondy’s house, promising themselves just one more drink. It was too late for arguing, too pleasant an evening. They sat on the porch and drank bad wine under the curved horn of a moon. Loaded with drink and moonlight, Sam’s head began singing like one of those metal bowls that Buddhists played with soft mallets. The more she thought about it, the more she found Jefferson’s openness a little disarming. Earnest, even.

“Sorry if I got a little touchy back there,” Bondy said.

“I noticed.”

“I just hate the idea of somebody swooping in on you when you’ve got so much on your mind. I get grabby when it comes to good people, and you’re good people.”

Sam had little doubt that Bondy believed her own words. Maybe in Bondy’s mind, capture was the purest form of love. *If you love something*, she might say, *string its legs together, before someone else does*. No amount of gallery shows was worth what Sam now felt rolling over her—the heaviness of Bondy, a cloud thick and stuffy, like hot foam rubber. Were there any

human connections that weren't fully encumbered? Why was it that everyone who got close to her had to *need* so much?

"We're all good people," Sam said, "and all good people are out of their fucking minds."

Bondy winked at her and then used her fingernail to fish something from her wine glass, maybe a stray insect. Sam didn't know what time it was, but she was pretty sure that at this point she'd have just a few hours of sleep before it was time to head to The Center.

When Sam finally said it was time for her to leave, Bondy leaned over and cupped her cheek, pulling her in for a kiss. At first Sam kept her mouth closed, but then she kissed back, good and long. Bondy's lips were smoother than Waylan's, more pliable and accommodating. When she pulled away, she could still taste Bondy's mouth, tart like the wine, but saltier. Sam's head was singing again, but the notes went sour, replaced by something so anti-melodic it might've been plunked from Waylan's guitar.

The vines that framed the gates of the front yard nipped and clawed at her shirt as if to direct her back inside. There came that ache again, that feeling that the world was trying to compress her. She wished that like a cloud she could just keep expanding. She cleared the vines, and when she looked back through the latticed fence, she could see the shape of Bondy under the dim porch light, tea candles lighting her wine glass so that it pulsed red. She could see Bondy in contour, pacing back and forth across the porch.

She pedaled home through early fog patches that swallowed up light and sound alike. The red flash of a traffic signal colored the air for miles around. The distant flame towers of the refineries were lost in the fog, and she liked how this made the town unfamiliar.

She nudged the bedroom door shut and slid under the covers, her hands searching for Waylan, the warmth of him. They lay face to face, their bodies creeping toward the bed's saggy, bowled middle.

How was she supposed to tell him? The plaster arms, for instance—should she mention them? Or Main Street laying there all empty and slanted in the wind as it led them to the beach? How would she explain that?

She put her hand on the meat of his arm, traced its length down to the hand, the fingers rough and fleshy between the joints. Only somewhat awake, he murmured, snuggled up closer to her. What would he do when she finally left? She wasn't sure, but she didn't expect that he'd cope well. He was probably close to losing his job as it was. Maybe it was better to wait until he was feeling better. At least he was sleeping soundly tonight, no thrashing, no sleep-mumbling. Sam wanted to fall asleep with her head touching his and breathe the salty sea smell of his hair. She loved that smell. There were still so many parts of him that she loved.

## CHAPTER 19

The warmth of Sam's breath against the back of his head ferried him from sleep. He didn't startle, just gathered a contented breath. The room was dark, but she smelled good, and there was light enough to tell she was smiling. It had been a long time since she'd appeared so happy to see him. Same face he remembered from the nights when they beachcombed through the evening and then made clumsy, giggling love inside their sleeping bag right there on the sand, not giving a damn who wandered by.

He missed those days so badly that when he leaned forward and kissed Sam, his mouth engulfed both of her lips and much of her chin. She slid out of her panties and they jostled in the dark. A sort of defeated moan escaped Sam, who kept her eyes closed. Her body felt warm, but Waylan's added dosage sent spider legs of numbness to new areas of his body. Twenty minutes later, Sam had given up on the moaning and the theatrics, and though wringing with sweat, he still wasn't close to finishing. He'd always imagined that this sort of endurance would make him a more satisfying lover, but in Sam's eyes he saw more concern than pleasure. He would've liked to roll over and fall asleep, but he couldn't just stop.

## CHAPTER 20

Sam's thoughts kept circling back to Bondy. She took to gazing out the windows as her patients started and rambled. She'd begun to resent them, these tiresome people whose tales played out like loose reconfigurations of former tragedies she'd heard before. Their stories were derivative and un compelling, and would only develop into greater woes yet. Sam stopped herself, wondering just whose cynical voice had piped up so suddenly. Not hers. No, cynicism was a side of the street she chose not to walk on. Waylan, for instance, could get better. Anyone could get better if they wanted it bad enough.

Police sirens were wailing—had been wailing—but only now did they register. A fender-bender outside the high school, maybe, or a tourist drowning or falling to heatstroke. Anybody's guess.

When her desk phone rang to match the sirens, her heart jangled sharp inside her chest and then she sensed a corrosive quality to the air pouring through the vent of the window unit. Something was burning that wasn't meant to burn. She stood and looked through the window. A pillar of black smoke swung up over what could only be the primary school. Seeded by windblown particles, rainclouds were already swelling up on the dirty skyline.

She knew she'd need keys. She rummaged through the desk, pulling drawers open, shifting papers, investigating all the places where the keys wouldn't be. When she found them—still on her desk—she gathered them up by the white metal ring and made for the door before stopping short. She'd left the window-mounted A/C unit on. She faltered and stepped backward. The phone was still ringing. She staggered, lurched back to the desk. She'd make herself answer the phone, which would almost certainly be a bad news sort of call. But she could do it if she tried. She could make herself answer the phone.



She picked up the receiver, pausing before she spoke. The nurse on the other end kept it brief. She explained that Tanager had incurred some second-degree burns, but she was in stable condition, and calling for Sam's company.

On the highway, she passed a man whose easy gait spoke a sense of effortlessness that reminded her a lot of Waylan's. It was Jefferson, still dressed in the same clothes he'd worn to the bar the previous night. He raised a hand as she passed and she did the same. Would've been nice if she could offer him a ride, not wanting to face what needed facing over at the hospital.

As she drove on, Sam wondered if maybe the universe had spent its supply of unique people, and the strangers she met as an adult would become more and more redundant. Maybe in a way the old psychiatrist's joke was correct in ways it had never intended. People really were no different than corn—you could mash it, bake it, liquefy it, fry it up and press it into a million different shapes, but at the end of the day, what was the difference, really? To what extent was Jefferson just a different version of Waylan? Of course they weren't actually brothers—that would be pretty much impossible. But they could've been. A lot of the men she knew could've been brothers. She tried to remember the moment that life started offering fewer surprises and more repetition, but there was no moment. Must have happened slowly, like Waylan collapsing into himself, a jack-in-the-box who no longer jumped, just sat there in its container, sulking.

She thought she knew what he found appealing about big cities—the tire-slick streets, the glass-scaled office buildings, the sidewalks with their countless collisions of disparate bodies, languages, food smells. But all the beautiful myths of city life would wear off pretty damn quickly, and then he'd start mooning about the Canadian wilderness or whatever else.

She wasn't even opposed to the idea of moving, not really. Her fear, which caused her more than a little shame—her line of work depending on a *glass is half-full* sort of assumption

that improvement was possible—was that he'd only get worse. City, country? It would make no real difference. At a certain point, even her optimism bottomed out. One day she might not be able to stop Waylan from hurting himself. She'd seen clients skip their meds and lose control before. Some of them had to be institutionalized or rendered so inert with chemicals that they were only really human from the neck down. She wasn't sure she'd be able to stop Waylan if he took the bad route, and she had decided a long time ago that she loved him too much to watch him implode.

#

Tanager in her hospital bed looked like a blown light bulb, her body swaddled in gauze so that only her head was visible, the skin singed near hairless. She watched Sam with eyes that boiled out of their sockets, like her surroundings left her perpetually shocked. Sam smiled down at her, pressed a delicate finger to her blistered forehead, which was cracked and weeping fluid in some spots. So often Sam found herself doing this—touching things she didn't want to touch, saying things she didn't want to say, just so people didn't have to be afraid of their own skin or their own repulsive thoughts. That was her humanly duty, and it ticked her off that so few people were willing to share the burden of said duties. Not that anybody wanted to, and not that she was a better person. Just that certain unpleasant tasks had to be done.

“Hello, sweetie.”

“Hey, Ms. Sam.”

The child's bandaged hands were clumsy as oven mitts, so Sam held up first the small sheets of posterboard and then the tray of watercolor paints, which she'd purchased for herself but kept leaving on the backseat of the station wagon. She didn't even know if Tanager liked to paint, but hey, it was worth a shot. The child's bugged eyes followed her movements.

“I’d like you to make a painting each day as your hands feel better,” Sam said. “I think it’ll be good for you.”

“All I can paint is a bird.”

Sam slid a fiberglass chair forward and sat. “Well there’s nothing wrong with a bird.”

“I hate birds.”

Tanager’s eyes rolled up to a television mounted on the wall. Cartoon characters capered to a score of trombones.

“They’re talking about building waterslides down past Azar’s,” Sam said.

Tanager whimpered, probably imagining the sting of chlorinated water against the raw nerve endings where her skin used to be. Strike one.

“Well you’ve got an ice cream date with me to see about just as soon as you feel well enough to leave this place.”

“I like Rocky Road,” Tanager said.

“So do I.”

“That’s Yosemite Sam,” Tanager said, motioning to the TV. “I used to watch this with my daddy. Not Mr. Chambers. My real daddy.” Sam nodded, thinking that Yosemite Sam reminded her very much of Nels Prescott, Waylan’s boss. Tanager’s poached eyes rolled to meet Sam’s. “Ms. Sam, I already know I been kicked out of school. Mr. Chambers said so.”

So she had set the fire. Sam had been waiting for the right moment to ask.

“I didn’t want to go back to that school anyway,” Tanager said. “They all called me Tan-Tan, dumb-as-the-sand.”

“I don’t think you’re dumb, sweetie.” Sam stood and started taking up a bandaged hand before thinking better of it.

“Do you think I’m mean, Ms. Sam? Like, mean in the heart?”

“You’re not mean, sweetie. You’ve just had a tough ride.”

“But I was lighting fires way before Daddy left.”

“Try to relax now.”

“I just like the color of fire. The smell of it.”

Tanager’s cracked lips drew into a feeble smile. Maybe Tanager didn’t see what the fuss was all about. Fire was pretty, and what more was there to say? This girl might’ve burned down her school, but she wore the half-guilty smile of a child who’d just eaten the last oatmeal cookie.

Feeling eyes on her, Sam turned, expecting a doctor or orderly. Instead, Myles Crow shuffled forward, neck craning to follow the TV. He deposited an aloe plant on the bedside table, the roots still trailing. A clump of dirty plant stems protruded from the pocket of jeans, like they were growing out of his kidneys. Sam glanced at the broken line of soil that led back through the door and down the corridor. She hoped like hell that he’d brought all of that for Tanager.

“Tanager,” Sam said, “Myles came to see you.”

The girl cut her boggled eyeballs over to Myles, who fidgeted and rubbed his hands together like he was cold. Beneath his overalls, he wore a T-shirt depicting a cartoon mouse with a rakish eye patch.

“Thanks,” Tanager said.

Myles responded with an unworldly warbling noise.

“It was very thoughtful of you to come,” Sam told him. “The plant was thoughtful, too.”

“Characterized by succulent leaves lined with serrations,” he said, the words chained together in a kind of sustained growl. “Often used for treating burns.” When he finished

speaking, his throat kept grinding for a few seconds after. Sounded like an appliance winding down.

“Thank you, Myles. Now who’s that on your shirt?”

“I like Danger Mouse,” he said, unable to suppress a crooked smile. “I like Penfold, too.”

She stepped closer to him, and he resumed his fidgeting. “Myles,” she whispered, not wanting Tanager to hear, “did you know about that boardwalk man who was struck by lightning?”

“Victims often experience the subdermal formation of Lichtenberg figures.” He paused, his throat still making its racket. “These fern or flower-like patterns can remain on the victim’s skin for hours or even days after contact.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“All I wanted was to pop the balloons” he said, eyes wandering out of true. “I left because I could smell the bad weather coming, just like before.”

“Okay then. Just wanted to hear it from you.”

“Could we go have ice cream now, Ms. Sam?”

“Not today, Myles. You’d better get on home now.”

“Are you still making do with that Waylan Dranger?”

“Go home, Myles. And no more presents on the porch, please.”

Myles pulled the bundled weeds out of his pocket and pressed them into her hands. She watched a fog of pollen lift off their tops and billow up toward her sinuses. Terrific. She’d probably be sneezing all afternoon.

Myles exited with an obscene bowing motion that involved all faculties of his body. An orderly was already laboring over a bright yellow mop bucket, cleaning the broken trail of dirt

that ran through the corridor. Nurses stationed at the center desk eyed him over their paperwork. Sam raised her sad bouquet. They were sunflowers, or they had been once upon a time. She watched a trio of leaves flake away like dander and spiral to the floor.

When she looked up again, Waylan stood outside the door, shirt pasted against his body like muddy newsprint, soiled bootprints marking his path inside and earning him baleful looks from the nurses. Myles skulked up to him on unsteady feet. Good. Maybe those two could finally bury the hatchet.

“I gave them some aloe for the burns,” Myles said.

“You know who could use your burn remedy, Myles?” Sam didn’t like the sound of that. Didn’t sound like they were mending fences.

“I don’t.”

“Sure you do,” Waylan said. “What about that old carnie who ran the balloon-popping booth?”

Should she interfere? No, she’d had enough of that. Maybe if she stayed out of it they could put their little feud to rest.

“Now I don’t know about him, Waylan Dranger.” Myles wrung his hands.

“You do know him,” Waylan said, edging closer. “I saw you give that fella a nasty look and not an hour later the cops were scraping him up off the boardwalk like a goddamn campfire marshmallow.”

“That’s not on me,” Myles wailed.

“Waylan,” Sam said, shaking her head.

Waylan brushed past Myles and walked over to Tanager's bed, where he paused to hook his arms around Sam's waist. Felt good to hold him. Her chest was bound up with cold knots, and she hadn't been aware of it until now.

Myles was already gone when they let go of one another.

"How'd you know where to come?" she said, taking Waylan's hands, squeezing like she might reshape them.

"School was still spitting out smoke when I came by on my bike. One of the firemen bought a bookcase from us last month. He told me what happened."

She placed the sunflowers in the wastebasket and stood over the sleeping girl, the machines trafficking unsightly fluids through coiled plastic. A monitor chirped for every heartbeat.

"Christ, that looks painful," Waylan said, peering down to see Tanager, nostrils flaring. "How are the other kids?"

"They all got out. She must've pulled the fire alarm long before she actually started the fire. I think that'll be good information to use in her case."

Waylan dabbed sweat from his chin. "Definitely a good thing." He must've known as well as she did that Tanager's future was pretty much keel-hauled at this point. He wasn't even trying to sound sincere.

"You think I'm a fool," she whispered. "Probably always have." All the years of strained hopefulness and she finally felt herself losing heart, the raw and irresistible magnitude of his pessimism eclipsing the light in the room, drawing dark blood to the hollows of her eyes and slackening the skin of her face.

“I don’t,” he said. “Did you think I meant that sarcastically? I love you. And I love what you do.”

“Love you too,” she said, wondering if he really meant what he’d said, thinking maybe if he were sincere more often she’d be able to recognize it. She placed her hand over his where it hooked over the rail of Tanager’s bed.

Waylan draped his arm about her waist, and together they watched over Tanager’s pitiful body. The little girl moaned like a snakebitten goat. Sam tried to place a hand on the child, to comfort her in some way, but she could find no skin that wasn’t blistered an angry red.

She was still with Tanager two hours after Waylan left.

#

When she finally returned home, the house resembled the face of a euthanized giant. She opened the door and entered the dark of its unmoving lungs. Even Balthazar kept hushed, his whining more like whispering as she kneaded his fleshy ears. The couch revealed nothing of Waylan but a swaddled mass and a single exposed arm, which he’d speared through the covers and left hanging over the cushion, like it might detach itself and cobble together bizarre artworks in the darkness while the rest of him slept.

She wasn’t going to wake him up, wasn’t going to bring up Bondy and the whole kissing and touching business. It’d been a long day, and who’d benefit from another argument?

She slipped through the sliding glass door and made her way to the art room. Shelves crowded with projects in various stages of incompleteness. On one shelf, a half dozen mason jars stained various colors sat with lamps fitted into their mouths, the wires trailing like umbilici. The unfinished light fixture no longer interested her. She moved on to a bin of found objects and lifted out a round-cut mirror. She polished the glass with the hem of her shirt. Hers was a lovely



face, though her eyes held a grayish light that'd always struck her as frustratingly neutral. The color of clouds that weren't quite full enough to make rain. Well she was still a rain-maker, by God, neutral eyes or not. Then there were her teeth, which drew so many compliments. They were veneers—utterly fake—and it irritated her that people became so fixated on a feature that wasn't even really hers. Sam placed the mirror back in the bin, the initial stage of a new project already arranging itself in the part of her mind where ideas took shape with little need of her.

In the den, she picked up the cordless phone and considered carrying it to the back porch. She'd only be calling for a quick talk. Just to tell Bondy about Tanager and perhaps mention that she'd thought of a new project. It was getting late, and she knew she shouldn't go out. If she called Bondy at all, it'd just be for a short talk. Waylan listed over onto his stomach and bellowed. Legs churning, he gibbered about clowns and subsided.

Sam eyed the phone. Amazing invention. Still blew her mind how Bondy's voice—anyone's voice—was only a keystroke away.

## CHAPTER 21

Prescott's commitment to the pirate restaurant was unwavering. By June, nearly all signs of the lot's construction had been absorbed back into the earth or scattered by the wind. No machine treads scored the ground, no mounded earth, no grumbling mixers. The strewn oyster shells burned white below the dark logwork exterior, so that the restaurant lay cradled in light. A few junky cars grazed over the shells. A sign marked *Lafitte's* hung in arcane script, the letters skewered by a painted cutlass.

The lobby contained a few rows of fiberglass booth seats and Formica tables straight out of the fifties. A good-sized section of floor space away from the tables had been roped off and unofficially designated as a kind of playground. Children climbed aboard a coin-operated corsair. They hung from its sails, tore at its jolly roger, spun its helm in rough circles, their hands tacky with spilled milkshake. The ship hung over a shallow pool of colored plastic balls. The most brazen kids climbed onto the end of the fiberglass cannon to feed trash and cheeseburger rinds into its mouth. "Pow!" they cried.

Waylan was mostly relegated to the kitchen, which he preferred to the front of the house. Like choosing between eating your broken glass with lemon juice or with road salt, but at least he had that. He peered out from under the brim of an imitation suede pirate hat as a clutch of rounded beef patties sputtered and popped over a grease slick. The kitchen smelled of sliced onions and gristle and old milk, a greasy tang to the air that you could taste. He pushed the sere meat pucks to and fro with a spatula, flipping every few minutes, watching the heat reduce them. With his free hand, he blotted the sweat from his cheeks while the opposite hand dealt a round of sliced cheese that melted wax-like over the patties. When they got melty enough, he folded the burgers between toasted buns, dressed them with ketchup and mayo from caulking guns, and

lanced them together with plastic cutlasses the size of toothpicks. He loaded the finished burgers into paper sleeves.

“Order up,” Waylan said.

Owen scuttled to the fryer and portioned out heaps of sweet potato fries onto a wooden tray. Waylan arranged the burgers, and Owen returned to the counter to ring up the family’s meal, his head canted so that he could favor his left eye. A pirate’s eye patch covered the right. The boy was way too enthusiastic. When Waylan had tendered the change, Owen reached under the counter.

“Don’t forget your prize,” Owen said, sounding pretty chipper.

Owen came up with a fistful of gold-tinted aluminum coins, which he dropped on the food platter. The little kids smiled as they snatched them up. When the family had settled into their hardwood booth, Waylan stalked up next to Owen.

“You should tell the little kids they’re chocolate fucking coins,” he said. “Maybe one of them chokes to death and they’ll shut the place down.”

“At least we’re out of the heat,” Owen said.

“Out of the heat? Try bending over that grill for six hours.”

The kitchen door swung open. Prescott appeared stouter than usual in his dark cape, his neck bedraggled with sweat-slick rows of costume beads, head crowned with a suede captain’s tricorne. He sidled up to the register and reached down to refit the cuff of an enormous black leather boot.

“How many scallop burgers we sold?”

Waylan demonstrated with three fingers.

“That’s supposed to be our flagship item,” Prescott said. “How long before those scallops in the back turn?”

“After tonight, they won’t taste right,” Waylan said. “Or smell right, for that matter.”

“I thought they looked okay,” Owen said, shrugging.

“Those are bonafide sea scallops,” Prescott said, “and they’re not cheap. Try pushing them a little harder, fellas.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Owen said. He practically sang the words, probably just to get on Waylan’s nerves.

Prescott gave them a crafty wink. Then he disappeared through the kitchen doors, scratching his chin, charting a mental course to Tortuga by starlight, maybe, or designing treacherous ends for the British Royal Navy. Waylan waited until he was sure Prescott wasn’t coming back.

“Don’t ever contradict me on the sea scallops,” he said to Owen.

“But they’re still fresh.”

“I know that, you imbecile. But if he loses enough money he might come to his senses and put us back to real work out in the field.”

“He’s not going back to that, so shut up about it.”

“Well, well. Someone’s wearing his big-boy britches today.” Even as Waylan said it, he feared the inevitable was already in motion: Owen was adding himself to the long list of people who’d outgrown Waylan. Owen wrenched the door of the kitchen shut behind him like it was him—Owen—who had cause to be pissed off. Waylan watched through the glass port as he stormed to the far wall and threw open the door of the walk-in refrigerator. Owen was going to take stock of the scallops, just in case Waylan actually grew bold enough to pitch them, which he

wouldn't. He'd felt this before, with Reeve, with any of his childhood friends. People outgrew him, got bored of him. Always humiliating to lose an admirer, but he also felt like he had a belly full of nettles.

Waylan received orders for no more than a dozen burgers during the lunch rush, after which he took out a plastic bottle and striped the surface of the grill with lines of water. With the spatula, he planed away the greasy residue and scraped the sludge into the grease trap, working until the grill shined again. Owen went back to the walk-in and returned with two pale green heads of lettuce, which he chopped at the sink, his back turned to Waylan.

Later, Prescott summoned Waylan to his office, which he'd wallpapered with bumper stickers and cartoons, some political, some vaguely pornographic, the rest just vulgar. Dusty furnishings lent the room a stale funk, even with the room's three fans, each of them zeroed in on Prescott's ever-sweaty head.

"Ahoy, Captain," Waylan said.

"Waylan, sit down."

Waylan sat while Prescott kicked back in his chair.

"You still making that fruity furniture art for extra money?"

Waylan glared at him. So here it came. Guys like Prescott, they couldn't resist a stupid irony—the construction worker who happened to make and sell clocks, tables, lamps, whatever. Waylan was tired of hearing these jokes from anyone, let alone Prescott, who was rumored to operate a TV out of his bathroom, lest he miss a touchdown mid-shit.

"Oh, come on now," Prescott said. "I'm not going to tease you. Matter of fact, I'm envious. Always wished I had a talent for something, whether it was sports, arts, school—anything." He nodded, lost in some wistful memory. Waylan wished Prescott would go on and

say something. He didn't like being left to wonder what sorts of murky ideas were inching their way up Prescott's brain stem.

"I'll be direct," Prescott finally said. "We're in trouble."

"What's wrong?"

"Not selling enough. We're only selling the bottom tier. We make money on the scallop burgers. We make money on the shrimp and we make money on the milkshakes. We don't make money selling just value burgers and sweetie fries and tap water."

"Well sir I'll have to try harder."

"Me too, Waylan. Feel like I've let you boys down. Here I've been promising a job where you don't have to carry a shovel and you don't have to go home smelling like a roughneck. Isn't that the American Dream?"

"My dreams are a lot stranger than that," Waylan said.

"Well, that's my American Dream."

"Anyway, the world will always need ditch diggers. You at least have that." Anyone else and he'd have made a more subtle approach, but who'd ever accuse Prescott of understanding a thing like subtlety? Here was a notable exception where the direct course was good and proper.

"I've got no mind for that sort of work and you know it. I'll be out of business. Owen—well, he'll have to find something. At least you still have your little furniture business."

Waylan felt his face redden at this additional mention of his artwork, but mostly he felt disappointed that his boss would give up the construction business so easily. And for what? Pirate burgers that no one wanted. Waylan tried to rein in his temper. His tongue was very close to snapping off a good many spiteful words at Prescott and his pirate costume, but he knew he shouldn't.

“You know Sam’s pregnant?” Waylan found himself saying.

Fresh tributaries of sweat broke out on Prescott’s face. His pores were multiplying to accommodate even greater workloads.

“Pregnant?” Prescott said.

Waylan spread his hands to show how far beyond words their situation was.

“Well congratulations,” Prescott said, eyes widening. He doffed his tricorne and checked inside, maybe for insects. “All I can tell you is I’m trying my damndest here. Truly. But I’m in the market for ideas, so let me know if you have any.” He paused to run a stubby finger through his costume beads. “We may not be here much longer.”

“You know at Gulf Burger they send the carhops down a chute on roller skates?”

“Yeah, and they fry all their side items in lamb oil. You want me to fire you and Owen out of a cannon every time you turn a dollar?”

“My point is people remember the gimmick. What is it you want them to remember about coming here?” He’d shifted the authority roles, establishing himself as the interlocutor and forcing his boss to answer the questions. The would-be pirate shifted in his chair, sweating harder and clearing his throat. Waylan suppressed a smile.

“The scallop burgers,” Prescott said. “And the sweetie fries. All the fun pirate swag. Isn’t that gimmick enough for one restaurant?”

“Maybe not,” Waylan said, thinking about dreams and how they functioned, having deployed a trail of mental breadcrumbs that led him to startling possibilities. Like, maybe the whole human experiment had once existed as a singular dream, and all subsequent dreams were just corrupted duplicates. That begged further questions. Exactly *how many* reiterations could pass before an idea was rendered inert? He wasn’t sure, but he suspected that Prescott’s

American Dream didn't belong to him any more than the construction outfit had. The idea itself was hollow, and maybe that was precisely why Prescott could love it. Children coveted thin-walled gumballs and balloons and grew into adults who coveted homes with high ceilings and crown molding. Elegant shells.

He'd have to think in those terms—elegant shell terms—if he was going to help salvage Lafitte's. He'd have to explore certain difficult questions, like, *What do people love?* Or more fundamentally: *Do people love?*

#

They pulled into the Gulf Burger lot with the windows down, Owen with his head slung outside in hope of cooler weather. The gray lot mirrored midday heat. As Waylan edged the car into a parking stall, a string of litter eddied and then swept into a rotating spout of crimson dust and trash and a few unlucky lizards. He watched the vortex spin up until its top was well out of view, laminar walls undulating. The funnel would draw them in, hot updrafts slipping around the car's frame, rolling it slowly toward the hollow core, the sensation so intense that Waylan stomped the brake pedal. The dust devil veered past, danced across the highway, and dissipated among the traffic.

"Why are we here?" Owen said.

Waylan mined for change in the car's cup holder. "Best not to think in those terms, Owen. The universe can't answer its own riddles. It doesn't even know what a riddle is."

"No, I mean why are we *here*?" Owen motioned to their immediate surroundings.

"I like it here. Helps me think. You know what you want?" he said, pointing at the backlit menu.

"What would Mr. Prescott think if he saw us?"



Intercom static interrupted Waylan's answer. He leaned his head out the window and ordered a round of burgers and malted milkshakes. Avery rode down the slide more slowly this time, her posture rigid and confident. She skated to the car without so much as a lurch and handed over the food intact, her uniform pouring off the smell of dill pickles and rendered lamb. Her elbows had healed, but the skin still glowed with the soft and pinkish hue of scar tissue. Places he'd once kissed, though the sensation was long gone. Unreal, how little he could remember of her. As if they'd never slept together. He knew she had a birthmark like spilled paint on her thigh, but he couldn't remember what it looked like in the starlight. Was that what would happen with Sam? Would he forget that chirping sound she made, or how cool her mouth felt afterward?

Avery greeted them with so many of the same words she had before, and this redundancy added another onion layer to Waylan's despair. His would always be a generation of terminal adolescents who felt too awkward to acknowledge one another. Intimate strangers.

Waylan smiled at her, hoping she might waver, might at least settle for a *Don't I know you?* Avery did a little curtsy, wheeled around, and made for the kitchen, the sandstorm hiss of bearings following her.

"Avery," he called, but either she didn't hear or didn't choose to.

"Not bad I guess," Owen said, motioning to the burger he was working on.

"So is it leaps and bounds better than what we serve?"

"Not even all that different. I like our stuff a little better. I don't think they change their lamb oil."

"So why do people come here?"

"It's been here longer."

“We have to find a way to stand out,” Waylan said, sniffing a fry. “I don’t think the answer is pirates and I don’t think the answer is a ten-dollar scallop burger.”

They sat there for a while, chewing and speculating. Owen was right. The burger was good and spicy, but the fries smacked of freezer-burn. When they were finished eating, Waylan loaded their trash into the nearest receptacle and turned the ignition. The engine cleared its throat and he angled the car out for the highway. Again, he passed under that Gulf Burger billboard and the weathered bones of the sea turtle. The sea turtle? Waylan braked in the median, staring at the billboard, the plated dome of a turtle shell set in relief against the sign’s dark backdrop. In a tinny register, the archival lobe of his brain repeated a question he’d not yet answered.

*By land or by sea?*

## CHAPTER 22

He sat upright in bed, suspecting that he had the answer to the turtle's riddle if he could just remember the dream. It was dark and the room smelled of salt and lavender. From the darkness outside the window came the muffled squall of a cat. The feel of Sam's hand clasping his, her grip slack and clammy when it'd always been so firm. He untwined his fingers from hers and watched the graceful digits curl into an empty fist, which he came close to grasping again before hurrying out the door.

The house held its silence, only the dull tinkling of Balthazar's collar as he attended Waylan to the door. The dog peered out after him as he pulled the door closed, brows furrowed with paternal concern.

Windows open, he idled down streets slicked with dew. Not even the restless familiars stirred in these hours, but huddled beneath their blankets in alleys and culverts, whatever would last the night. There were few lights to guide him along the strip, save the neon signs and lighted interiors of bakeries or coffee bars, four-walled chambers that defied the ordinance of clocks. A patrolman was fast asleep in his cruiser in a drug store parking lot, his face obscured by a magazine.

At the sound side, gulls drifted over the docks like reprobate angels, jostling and crying for what sparse morsels had dried upon the splintery boards. A prized scrap of sun-dried baitfish, the crust of a discarded baloney sandwich. Waylan nodded proudly to the sport fishermen as they refitted their lines or pumped their fuel or sat red-eyed and sipping hot coffee and watching for the sun to labor up from its bathwater. He nodded to each and smiled and felt mostly indifferent to his not belonging here, he who would disembark in his grim farce of a skiff from parts unknown.

#

By sunrise, he was near the middle of the bay and closing on the pass, where most of the feeding squid had begun to withdraw and ride back out to sea. The deck held four large bodies, their black eyelets sharp in the gathering dawn. They'd left his yellow-gloved arms slimy, and green with ink. Standing over his catch, he could feel their eyes on him, still living, still calculating. The latest catch writhed, its tentacles straining to dismember its dead mates, like they were to blame.

Waylan opened his knife and bent to the pile. In moments, ropy tentacles fouled the deck. Gulls cried overhead, feinting and nipping at the mound, the breaking sky lighting crimson on their wings. They fell to the squid pile and winged upward with the slenderest pieces. Once airborne, they sparred over the choice cuts. Waylan had dressed nearly all the squid when he heard splashing sounds and saw the blood-bright water broken with a swimmer's clumsy strokes.

Waylan struggled to free the oars from the mounded squid. The gray metal locks rattled as he shipped the looms. He laid on them for several long minutes, until he was out of breath, and still the swimmer drew closer. He stowed the oars and brought a towel to his face to clear the sweat. His lungs felt raw from the effort, but the swimmer hadn't slowed. Waylan lifted his canteen and pulled a plastic orange medicine bottle from his pocket. He downed a pill with a shot of canteen water.

The boat dipped and swayed as Reeve climbed aboard. He dropped into his seat with a satisfied gasp. Seawater pumped from his shirtsleeves and jean cuffs. He grinned at Waylan and blew water from his nose. Waylan let his fingers knit together. He hoped into his hands and into the stinking depths of the Gulf that when he opened his eyes again, his brother would be gone,

but you couldn't wish Reeve away. There he was, the rough shape of him sharpening in the dawn light.

"You missed my birthday," Reeve said.

"Funny how you never look any older."

"But you, brother. You look like you been fished out of a drain." Reeve glanced at the piled squid and pinched his nose. "Guess you're awful fond of those damn things."

"Guess so."

"They stink like octopus crotch." Reeve sneered, so giddy with laughter that he nearly fell out of the boat. He stood, stepped around the squid, and clapped a wet hand against Waylan's leg, leaving a watery handprint. Reeve fished a longneck out of the ice box and ambled back to his seat, his back turned to Waylan. "Octopus crotch," Reeve said, giggling.

"You've got some kind of yellow mess hanging out of your nose," Waylan said, wiping his own nose to show Reeve, who didn't actually have any such goop, but Waylan knew it'd shut him up. For all of Reeve's bluster, he'd always been self-conscious like that.

"How's the construction gig these days—you hit the big money yet?" Reeve was still wiping at his nose.

"Quiet, Reeve. You'll scare the fish."

"Come on, now, mister big-shot foreman. Next time you go squidding I might be inclined to give my legs a bit of a stretch. I'm talking about a yacht." The next swallow of beer soured Reeve's face, like what he drank gave him excruciating pain. Veins stood out on his neck.

"Ought to invite me along. I'm your little brother, after all."

"You're not."

"And you let me die. Clear skies, my water-logged ass. You wanted me gone."

“You should’ve had sense enough to turn back.”

“You never even looked.”

“We searched for months.”

Reeve spat. “You ever think of what I’d look like all blue and bloated? Ever think about what the crabs would look like as they spun out of my mouth on those roachy little legs?”

“I’ve seen it in dreams. Probably will for the rest of my life.”

“Dreams. What about my dreams?” He thumbed his chest.

“You never had any.”

“Crab bait,” he said. Almost sounded profound.

“I won’t live like this,” Waylan told the open water. He unpocketed the pill bottle, held it up to the sky.

Reeve kicked at one of the last undressed bodies. He bent down for it, then faltered. He steeled himself with another pull of beer and took the dead animal into his arms, recoiling as the limp tentacles draped over his arms.

“Damn, that smarts,” he said, wincing. His hand disappeared inside the deflated body, which yawed on his knee and became animate. The squid took stock of Waylan, enormous eyes dilated.

“Waylan?” the squid said, “Why the long face, pal? Forget the construction work. You’re a goddamn certified cheeseburger engineer.” The squid’s voice reminded him a little of the canary-hungry cartoon cat he and Reeve had watched as kids. Sebastian, was it, or Sylvester?

“Correct-o,” Reeve said, frowning at the squid, which swiveled to meet eyes with him, “but I don’t believe that’s what he’s down about.”

The squid swiveled back to Waylan. “You think he’s worried about the future? Maybe he’s come to understand that like baldness, mental instability is hereditary.”

Reeve’s face went taut with theatrical concern. “I’m not sure he’s aware,” he said, bringing a free hand to his mouth.

“Well if he traced back the genealogies,” the squid said, “he might notice that his great grandmother was known to charge into the post office stark naked and swear to planet Venus that her prize Angus had drawn her a map to Jean Lafitte’s buried treasure.”

“Let’s hope Waylan never catches wind of it,” Reeve whispered. “We don’t want him having a scandal out at the burger place. Not with a little tyke on the way.”

“Lordy,” the squid said, “that’s right. He’s told his boss that the missus is with child.”

“What a fine mess he’s created,” Reeve said.

“And to think we’re the only ones willing to tell this poor fool the truth,” the squid said, wagging its head, which meant it was wagging the rest of its body.

“That’s right,” Reeve said. “I just wonder how he thinks his lady passes the time with that freakshow friend of hers.”

“The crucial question: does Waylan fully comprehend the sexual advantages of her third arm?”

“And if so,” Reeve said, “is he more jealous of Bondy or of Sam?”

Light rays poled down out of the eastern skies and broke up the patchwork clouds by the time Reeve ran out of material. Growing bored, Waylan dressed the last of his squid, and upon finishing, tore his final catch from Reeve’s hand, which glistened with slime. Reeve yowled and plunged his arm underwater like he saw flames. When Waylan smiled, Reeve’s face went dark and he began taking up the heavy fillets from the seat and flinging them overboard. They

might've looked like stranded lovers come to some terminal dispute, except of course that no one else could see Reeve. Waylan snatched Reeve's beer bottle and pitched it into the water—his only defense. His brother turned toward the shore, where the pale crescent of land formed a toppled quarter moon. Reeve sprang from the seat in an exaggerated leap that left the skiff pitching violently, water sloshing aboard and mingling with squid fluids.

Waylan returned the scaly craft to its moorings and walked toward the arcade and its expanse of parked cars. Seated atop a piling, Myles watched as he loaded the dressed squid into a cooler in the hatchback. He kept watch on Myles as he worked, the boy huddled over some small wood or clay object he shaved and hewed with a short blade. Even as he carved, his right eye toggled every few seconds in a bird-like flick to see Waylan. Though watchful as ever, Myles's eyes had gone red. Waylan thought he might even be crying.

#

The four of them studied the thick-cut marbled slab where it lay sputtering on the grill. Prescott and Owen regarded the meat with wrinkled noses and eyed Waylan, who carried a miasma of sea filth so potent it was almost visible. Connie bent down and added a slice of butter to the fillet. Prescott whisked more pepper.

"It's not browning," Prescott said, raising his tricorne to bend in closer.

"It's not red meat," Waylan said. "Doesn't brown like you'd expect. You have to be careful not to overcook it."

"Gets tough, does it?" Connie said.

"You could retread your tires just fine."

"I've got no idea how to dress something like this," Prescott said.



“Dress it like fish. Takes on the taste of whatever you season it with. Salt, pepper, lemon. We could even brine it so it comes out tender, like chicken.”

“We could hit the fillets with a patty stamp,” Owen said. “They’d come out shaped like regular burgers.”

“But how’s it taste?” Prescott said.

The filet sputtered for a few more beats before Waylan pinned it with a barbecue fork and cut it down the middle. Just the right amount of brown on the edges. He lifted the thick square of meat, which he fitted between two browned buns and topped with lettuce, tomato, caramelized onions, pickles, and tartar. He cut the sandwich into sections and passed them off. The four of them stood around chewing and nodding as the rest of the squid cooked.

“Expected it would taste fishier,” Connie said.

“They taste a lot better than they look,” Owen said. “Sort of sweet, actually.”

“What’ll you call them?” Connie said. “Squid burger just sounds trashy.”

“What about calamari burger?” Owen said.

“We can do better,” Prescott said.

“Devilburger might offend the churchy types,” Connie said.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Prescott said. “What do you think, Waylan?”

“I’d call it a calamari burger.”

“I believe you might be onto something,” Prescott said. “You know lobster was left for the poor until rich folks figured out how good it was. Used to call them cockroaches of the sea.”

“It’s all in the marketing,” Connie said.

“This might be just what Lafitte’s needs,” Prescott said. “And I’ll pay you for your fishing. And Owen too, if he wants.”

Waylan felt a tic developing in his right eyelid. He might not survive another round of Reeve's ventriloquism.

"You can pay a fisherman," Waylan said. "Or I can teach Owen how to work the jig. I don't care either way, but I won't go back out there."

Prescott took another bite and drew a speculative finger to his lips. Waylan winked at him. He was feeling a little cocky now, despite the lack of sleep. Thanks to him, Lafitte's might have a puncher's chance.

## CHAPTER 23

The following week, the town went overrun with exotic animals. As he drove home from work, Waylan spotted wild game galloping over the barrens and into the roadside bracken. There were wild bison, ibex, and once, a glimpse of spindly-legged giraffe. Maybe Gaston residents weren't paying attention to these animals, but he was. They had inspired his latest work—a flat-surfaced sculpture designed to hang upon the wall of the den. For the sculpture's placement, he'd even taken down a vintage beer ad and two brood-worthy photographs of Reeve. Dr. Jable would be happy when he told her.

In the art room, he'd assembled a landscape rendered in plate metal, brushed aluminum for the background, aged copper for the rugged savanna. On the copper flats, he stood tiny herbivores stamped from black iron and shaped over hot charcoal, little herds of horned grazers gathered in the shade of squat trees. Lean predators viewed them from an upland rise. He bonded the plates together and soaked them in an acid bath so they looked weathered. He felt kind of silly when he finally studied the finished product. Rinsed clean and dried, it still smelled faintly corrosive, but it reminded him of something that might hang on the wall of a child's bedroom.

Still, it was a nice distraction from work at Lafitte's, where business had expanded exponentially since the launch of—God, how he hated the name of it—Lafitte's First Mate Waylan's Famous Calamari Burger. There'd been a good deal of debate over whether to call it that or First Mate Waylan's Famous Lafitte's Calamari Burger, which made only slightly less sense.

#

An earthy odor greeted him at the doorway. Inside, a reeking scud layer of pot smoke, and underneath it, Balthazar trotted, winding tight circles. A tray of cupcakes sat on the kitchen

counter, their tops bare where the heavy slabs of pink icing had warmed over and skated onto the counter. They bore a suspicious resemblance to beached jellyfish, or maybe squid. Among the cupcakes, there was an antique lighter and a honey-colored glass pipe, its bowl still packed with scorched fibers. Twisted cries and laughter from the den. Waylan steeled himself, fearing that the wild animals had taken up residence in there.

Sam and Bondy sat red-eyed before the television, their legs folded and crossed, arms circling their ankles. They offered up a pair of wicked grins at his approach.

“We’ve been bad,” Sam said, her eyes swollen, rectal.

“I’ll be damned,” Waylan said.

“I’ll be damned,” Sam said. “My body is a salt mine filled with smoke.”

“It’s what?” Waylan said.

“Plus it’s full of holes,” she said, her nostrils flaring.

Bondy’s eyes were unsteady as they followed him. “That’s Waylan, but he looks like cartoon Waylan. Something’s off with him.”

“The cupcakes taste a lot better this way,” Sam said. “Like running your taste buds through a microphone. The flavor’s just—it’s bigger. You could fill a room with it.”

“You do taste a lot more,” Bondy said, her mouth slightly open.

“If Waylan plays his cards right I might have something for him to taste,” Sam said in mock whisper. “That was cheesy,” she said to Bondy. “Was that cheesy?”

Bondy cocked her head and turned from Sam.

“I’d like to know who’s funding this weed party,” Waylan said.

The glance that Sam shot him explained that he’d always be the person to ruin life’s meager joys. She closed her eyes to make him go away.

“That’d be me,” Bondy said, her voice instantly sober. “It didn’t cost us anything, and you’ll thank me when you see how good Sam sleeps tonight.”

Waylan nodded. Hard to object to that. He didn’t want to be an asshole.

“Hey, Sam says you’re going to save the pirate place from going bankrupt. By serving up those sea anem—” Bondy pursed her lips. “Sea anem—”

“Sea anemones,” Waylan said.

“That’s the one,” Bondy said.

“Actually, we’re serving those big squid,” he said.

“Well good for you,” Bondy said. “I hate those goddamn things. Your boss must be pleased.”

“He’s pleased to make Halloween a yearlong tradition.”

Sam and Bondy began giggling, and they didn’t stop.

“Completely ridiculous,” Bondy finally said, and that brought on a fresh bout of giggling.

The three of them stared deep into the unlit television, Bondy and Sam with their vague smiles mirrored in the dark glass, Waylan feeling very much outside of them. He would’ve liked to watch *Twin Peaks*. He would’ve liked Bondy to leave. Instead, she draped an arm over Sam’s shoulder. For a moment Sam’s eyes closed and her head slumped forward. Then, remembering Waylan was in the room, maybe, she shrugged and cleared her throat until Bondy removed her hand. Waylan recalled Reeve’s talking squid, certain lewd jokes about third arms and so forth.

“Honey,” Sam said to Waylan. “You’ve been gone all day and you’re a bit gamey.”

“You sure you don’t want a smoke?” Bondy said.

Dr. Jable had warned him against adding psychoactives to the slush of chemicals already piping through his bloodstream. Sam knew he wasn't allowed to smoke the stuff, and now he wondered if maybe Bondy knew, too. She might be screwing with him.

"Oh come on," Bondy said. "One hit can't hurt."

The blood came hammering at Waylan's temples. He felt a ripple of sweat break over his face.

"You two make quite the picture," he said. He waited until Bondy snaked her arm around Sam's shoulder before adding, "Like sisters."

Bondy sucked her teeth, apparently taking his point. Sam kept glancing back and forth between the two of them, trying to work up a friendly smile.

"She's lucky to have me," Bondy said. "And I am very, very lucky to have her."

"And take care of her, right, Bondy?" Waylan said.

"Please," Sam said, still trying to smile, convinced, maybe, that they could all still avoid what was coming.

"I try as best I can," Bondy said. "What she needs is somebody reliable. A partner who doesn't hold her back. When was the last time you made it out to an art show?"

"When was the last time you invited me to one?" He meant to match her anger, but it came out like an honest question. "Anyway, I don't answer to somebody who works at the freakhouse chasing little kids with a rubber arm."

A tic developed at Bondy's taut upper lip. Her redshot eyes ratcheted between Sam and Waylan, like she wanted one of them to tell her it was okay, they understood what people had to do for money.

Waylan turned to make for the back door when Bondy called him back.

“Why not pack up and head to New York if you’re too good for the small-time circuits? You could drive the hipsters wild with those cosmic clocks. Afraid you’d miss flipping burgers at Lafitte’s?”

He turned and saw her through smoking eyes, hating her in that instant, the terrible words and names he could call her charging his entire head with negative energy until the roots of his teeth popped with static. It would be exhilarating to let lightning fly from his tongue and burn her down, but he denied himself that satisfaction. He’d save those words.

Like a drunk, he shambled to the metal landscape he’d hung on the wall and tore it free, the mounting wire trailing its anchor points like electrodes. He gripped his artwork like it was a cafeteria tray and swung it hard against the kitchen entrance’s cornerpiece. The metal gonged and shivered in his hands, sending animal pieces skittering across the floor of the kitchen and den. Otherwise, the plates held their integrity. Beset by shrunken game, Balthazar lurched up from the floor and charged for the bedroom. Waylan’s laughter startled even him.

“Kind of beautiful,” he said, letting the sculpture drop. Sam and Bondy watched him, more astonished than afraid. Sam unwound a tiny elk from her hair and held it to the ceiling lamp, turning it between her fingers.

“It’s a shame,” Sam said. “I really liked that piece.”

“Returning to your question,” Waylan said, turning back to face Bondy.

“No,” Sam said, getting to her feet. “I’m not listening to this. I’ve seen enough broken for one night. If you two want to fight you can do it without me. Goodnight, my darlings.”

She followed the hound into the bedroom, leaving Waylan and Bondy to their cultivated silence. Waylan had already spent his anger swinging the sculpture. Besides, what was the point in fighting with Bondy if Sam wasn’t there to hear it?

Bondy sat with her arms crossed. “I’d leave,” she said, “but I’m still pretty high. You’ll probably kick me out anyway, won’t you?”

“Stay if you want.” Waylan stepped over and powered up the TV.

“What’s that you’re putting on?”

“*Twin Peaks*,” he said, sitting down on the floor beside her.

“Mind catching me up?”

Waylan leaned forward and rubbed his mouth. He’d start by describing Dale Cooper. No, he’d start by describing the opening sequence—the juxtaposition between automated sawmill and unforgiving mountain peaks. Or the pale form of Laura Palmer’s body washed up on that cold riverbank, the town encoiled in mist and secrecy.



## CHAPTER 24

July afternoons were so hot that Waylan became erratic with his medication. Some days he forgot outright and would double up the following day's dosage to compensate. The sun boiled off whatever big-city ambitions he carried. The world became shrink-wrapped, contracting in the heat until there was only Sam and Reeve and the blank ocean. New York, Chicago, San Diego—they all struck him as equally impenetrable. Hostile, even. He'd stay near Gaston Beach and its false desert. He sensed there was still work for him to do here, though he wasn't quite sure what it was.

He spent early mornings spent mired in the couch, or shaping his crude guitar music. At the beach, the waves lumbered ashore in fatigued sets. The Gulf appeared as a wide grease bath, sea gristle rendered and vatted in the heat. Squid kills crowded the beach, releasing a stink that announced itself for miles and released visible green fumes. The boardwalk carnies carried on defiantly in the heat. They rigged up industrial fans that only stirred the superheated air, making it more oppressive. Throughout their ballyhoo, they nursed oversized thermoses. The surfaces of their brightly painted booths grew tacky by mid-afternoon. Parkgoers paraded about with hands stained orange and green where they braced themselves against the heat, which the carnies only worked harder to joke away.

“Colder than a polar bear's pecker,” they bragged.

At the docks, fisher birds knifed down for their catch but swept up prematurely, like the water would scald them. The charter boats and skiffs left lingering scars on the water. Distant stacks of cumuliform clouds gathered so many miles southward their edges ran together and Waylan couldn't tell if it was the sky that made canvas for the clouds or vice versa. The squall lines reminded Waylan of outsized brains flickering with electricity.

#

“Whose boat is it?” Owen wanted to know. He scowled at Waylan from the seat of the ill-kept skiff.

“Who cares? No one’s ever bothered me for taking it. Go on, now. It’s too hot to argue.”

The boy drew a lean hand to his mouth. “Why can’t you just come out there with me and at least show me how to catch one? This squidding shit’s not exactly coded into my DNA. I’m not even a big fan of open water.”

“I already told you, I’m not going out there.”

“But why not? You did it just fine last time.”

Waylan dropped the oars, let them clatter against the deck. “Use those to row out into the pass. It’ll be choppy, and believe me when I say you’d rather not tip over.” He dropped a dull orange life vest. “Use that in case you stumble over your own slew feet and fall overboard.” Then he threw in the fishing rod and the net. “Use those to catch all the squid you can bear. Any fool can do it.”

“That’s it?”

“Three easy things to remember: don’t take off those gloves, watch you don’t hook yourself, and watch they don’t snap you with that beak. I’ll clean them when you get back.”

“Oh, that’s awfully big of you, Mr. Dranger.”

“I’m doing you a favor, you little shit. You’ll earn Prescott’s respect this way.”

“You said these things mainly come out at night. What if I can’t catch enough?”

“Guess you’ll be in for a long voyage. Now get on with it. I don’t want to see an inch of white on that deck.”

He watched as Owen rowed the skiff into a sweeping circle, a maimed frog trying to swim. The bow spun back against the deck with a hollow knock. Owen looked like he was ready to punch something, so Waylan used his foot to shove the skiff back toward the sound. Let him vent his spindly wrath on the squid. Owen tested the oars again, sweeping them with short, controlled strokes, now rambling more or less toward the oil rigs and the schooling squid. Twenty minutes later, Waylan could see Owen drawing closer to the pass, and already he regretted what he'd said. Beating up on Owen, such a Reeve thing to do.

Waylan felt a tickle deep in his skull. Maybe the worm was having a moment of clarity, capitalizing on Waylan's guilt. The worm had become more subdued with the increased medication, but it was never completely absent. Now he could feel the creature working on his brain, more slowly, but still stripping old connections with its nimble jaws and twining up new configurations. Waylan felt little pain other than an itch at the core of his skull, which he tried to remedy by boring his ear canal with his finger. Then he spotted a horsefly standing on the meaty part of his calf, making good eye contact as it tapped into his bloodstream. Waylan brought his hand down with a sharp slap. Nailed it! The impact left a tiny pool of blood and fly gore, the wings mired at the edges like paddles. Ouch, though. He'd slapped hard, leaving a hand-shaped welt.

Waylan let loose a stream of profanity—for the fly, for the heat that raised sweat in tides, and most importantly, for stinking Reeve, who'd made it impossible for him to fish. Finding nothing else of use, he snapped a dollar bill from his wallet and scraped away the fly's remains. Then he polished the bill against the edge of the dock. The paper came away only slightly cleaner.

The sky was polished of clouds, and the merciless heat drove him to the boardwalk in search of cold drink. Behind the roller coaster, he found a refreshment stand and a new gaming stall. At the near end was a counter topped with baskets of overripe tomatoes and a mist of fruit flies. At the far end, a sour-faced man sat with his head stuck through a hole in a plywood background, his face pocked with tomato seeds. A belled jester's hat crowned his head, the whole theme completed by a cartoon jester's body painted on the plywood. Waylan gawked. He'd never seen this game before, and it took him a moment to work out the logic, which he found disturbing: people were willing to pay money for the privilege of hurling produce at some guy's head, and for no good reason.

"Hey fella," the jester shouted. "Bet you throw tomatoes like old people screw." Right. So there was the reason. As Waylan turned for the drink stand, he could still hear the jester calling. "Where's your dignity, mister?"

"I don't believe in clowns," he called, without turning back. In fact he did believe in clowns, and found them pretty damn upsetting.

The attendant at the refreshment stand frowned at him when he doled out the bills for his drink. She held the soiled dollar to the sun. The paper was damp, and carried a watermark of Waylan's blood, mixed with the fly's. She added it to the register and wiped her hands. Waylan grinned at her as he sucked down the iced soda.

"You stay cool, now," he sang.

By the time he walked past the jester's stall, the guy had withdrawn his head from the backdrop and lifted a canteen to his mouth. Still gory with tomato pulp, he looked like a demon feasting on canned souls, the jester's bells ringing in time as he drank. That was the problem with clowns—they wallowed in the abject, insisted upon it. This one wanted you to sling

tomatoes at him, wanted to remind you that human beings were hardly a rung up the evolutionary ladder from scat-flinging apes. As Waylan stepped past, a crushed tomato grazed the top of his shoulder and skittered past him. From the jester's booth came abrasive laughter.

“See you round, big fella,” the jester called. Waylan didn't like the sound of that.

He looked for shelter under the boards, where it was at least ten degrees cooler and striped with shadows. And clown-free. A light breeze stirred, Waylan settled among the weedy sand and sea dross. Beside the nearest piling was another who slept bowed over like a gargoyle. He was surrounded by a loose collection of sculpted little humanoid figures that could only be Myles's. The boy's snoring sounded delicate, free of its characteristic racket. Waylan was still sitting there nursing his soda when Myles came awake, coughing and muttering like dreams of a world on fire had urged him from sleep and he was still trying to clear the smoke from his lungs.

“I didn't leave anything on your porch, Waylan Dranger.” A voice like the action of a neglected well pump. He gathered his legs so that they angled out like a grasshopper's. Waylan remembered the last time he'd seen Myles, the red eyes.

“You thirsty?” Waylan said. “I've got a couple bucks left. You could go get a soda. Just watch out for that tomato guy. You might be tempted to bring down the lightning on him if he runs his mouth.”

“Tomato, or *solarium lycopersicum*. Rich in lycopene. Native to South America.”

“You want a soda or what?”

“Soda makes me nervous, Waylan Dranger.”

“You don't have to call me by my full name. I'm probably the only Waylan down here.”

“Okay, then.”

“You like it here under the boards? Bet you see your share of funny-business.”

Myles's face lightened and his throat rattled to life. "I've seen folks naked and climbing on each other, if that's what you mean. Men with ladies. Men with men. Ladies with ladies. Is that funny?"

"I suppose it could be."

"There's a fella goes around saying he's brothers with you."

"That's just Jefferson."

Myles grimaced, like the name cued up bad memories.

"Anyways," Waylan said, "long as we're down here, I did have something to ask you."

"Alright, then."

"Did you see Reeve the morning he disappeared?"

Myles nodded, wringing his hands. "It was a Saturday. October twenty. I saw him leave the marina but he never did come back."

"You've got it right so far."

"They found a boat the next morning. Sure enough there was water and bull minnows in the bottom. More than one was still swimming."

"I'd almost forgotten that story." Cooler air funneled under the boards. Waylan even thought he felt a slight chill on the breeze.

"*Mugile cephalorus*," Myles said. "Also called black mullet or popeyed mullet. Prefers warm to temperate coastal waters."

"I never believed it," Waylan said. Over the years, it was like Reeve's disappearance had become more of a legend than a true occurrence. Waylan had finally stopped listening to all the hearsay about mythical hailfalls, whirlwinds, endless lightning strokes.

“There were water funnels in the sky on October twenty. Saw as many as three spinning down from the clouds at the same time.”

“Water funnels.” Waylan chewed a fingernail.

“It was a Saturday. October twenty,” Myles said, like Waylan had missed it.

Waylan stood and peeked out from under the boards. The boardwalk masses had finally found relief from the heat. A storm front colored like a lobe of wine grapes swelled less than a mile from shore.

“Think it’ll rain soon, Myles? I’m told you’re a good one to ask.”

Myles’s mouth cracked open and he drew a breath. “It just might.”

“You think anymore carnies will get struck down by lightning? Can you tell when it’s coming?”

“I can’t smell the lightning.”

“What about that morning on October twentieth? Did you smell the storm coming?”

“I told him it was coming. I told Reeve. He just laughed.”

“Just laughed.” Waylan tried not to blink, tried to keep the tears pinned back.

“I could show you where I saw those funnels. Out there in the pass.”

“I don’t want to see that,” Waylan said, dabbing his eyes with his shirt. “Figure Owen’s had enough fishing for today.”

Myles made direct eye contact with Waylan, as he’d not done before. Sitting there with his legs bowed up, he didn’t seem malicious, just uncomfortable. Eyes restless in his skull, like they wanted out.

Waylan left the boardwalk and walked north through the beach scrub and sandy foot trails that led through dollarweed and opened up to the sound. Owen was already waiting at the

dock when Waylan arrived. He sat with his back turned to Waylan, apparently enthralled by the storm. Wilted squid covered the deck, and Waylan knew from the boiling flies that he'd better dress them quickly.

Owen had left the lines loosely fastened about a pair of pilings. Waylan appraised them with a sucking noise. Household knots, they'd likely fail.

"Well we can't leave her like this," he said, motioning to the skiff. "She might carry off in the storm."

"Shit, it'd be real a shame if we lost your stolen boat."

He showed Owen how to tie a bowline knot and the boy nodded along, mildly interested, or maybe mildly irritated, Waylan couldn't tell. Owen's eyelashes were glued up with dried blood on one side. The skin of his knuckles was split and bruised.

"Listen," Waylan said. "I need to ask you something, and you've got to tell me the truth, now. Were you approached by any swimmers?"

"Who'd be swimming out to me, Waylan—a fucking mermaid?"

"Well you look like you just lost a prize fight, and I doubt it was the squid or you'd look worse yet."

"Of course it was the squid. That first one nearly pulled me overboard. I told you I'm not cut out for this."

"Any of them beak you?"

"No. I wore the gloves. I did what you told me."

Waylan laid a finger across his closed lips. "And you're sure you didn't see any swimmers? No younger fella with a taste for cheap beer? He would've cussed the squid and then said how I was a lousy brother."



“Brother?” Owen was wiping his hands against his shirt.

“Just tell me. Did you see him out there?”

“Your brother’s gone, Waylan.”

“We can agree on that. Only point I’m making is that if you happen to see him don’t listen. Plug your ears if you must.”

He set about cleaning Owen’s catch, beginning with the tentacles, showing Owen how to handle the knife properly. The storm advanced on them, its underbelly curling like the surface of an ocean viewed from beneath. Thunder potshotted overhead. As Waylan hewed the last clammy body, the first rain fell, spotting the parched wooden seats and striking fleeting dimples in the muculent pool left on the deck.

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Waylan groaned as they pulled into the lot. Cars strewn about the oyster shells and arranged in no discernible order. A line of stalled patrons coiled beyond the glass doors, its members wavering in the heat and stippling the ground with their sweat. Like spurned children, they peered inside at the more fortunate ones who would finally step out into the heat carrying full brown bags, which they hugged to their bellies. Food-bearing customers passed quickly through the jeering crowd, hungry family members following their progress from idling cars, motioning through the glass like lechers.

Nels Prescott would suffer no drive-thru window for his restaurant, and this meant that his customers had to endure a certain level of intimacy with one another. Some of the bolder patrons questioned aloud how many sandwiches the departing members had left for the rest, and upon being ignored, made desperate snatches at their food sacks. Waylan watched a pigeon-shaped lady rest her burdensome sacks of food on the curb only to flatten a heckler with a right

hand that came like swung lumber. A waiting customer had already lifted her bags when she turned back to reclaim them. The man galloped onward into the heat, checking every few steps for followers.

A rumble of cheers welled as Waylan and Owen smuggled the cooler through the kitchen's exit doors. The workers inside watched them through eyes redshot with steam and oven heat, the kitchen clamorous with syncopated percussion. Wooden spoons knocked at the bottoms of steel bowls, silverware chattered on its automated march through the dishwasher, squared blades fell in vicious arcs over a variety of animal and vegetable flesh. Fry cooks punched holes into the pale filets. The meat came away in perfect circles to be snatched up by the gloved hands of assemblers, who situated them between toasted bun halves, dressed the sandwiches, wrapped them in wax paper. Another crew grouped around the deep fryer, sending baskets of the sorbet-colored sweet potato fingers down into the hot oil and dredging them back up, now rippling with heat. The fries were then loaded into paper sleeves. Waylan's stomach wrung itself like a wet rag, but he didn't feel like eating.

Through the steam of the dishwasher, Waylan spotted Prescott's tricorne hat. Prescott crossed the kitchen floor like a caped juggernaut, head lowered, displacing the help as he came.

"I hope to high-water hell you boys caught enough," he said. He fumbled with the latch of the cooler and peered inside at the glistening slabs. "Thank God almighty. Folks outside were liable to riot." He paused, mopping sweat from his brow.

"Thank Owen," Waylan said. "Caught all those squid and didn't even get bit."

"Almost got my ass pulled out to sea," Owen muttered.

Somewhere behind them, a stack of pots tilted over, metal surfaces ringing against the floor like detuned bells.

“I’m starting to dread Saturdays,” Prescott said. “They were banging on the doors an hour before we opened. They ran Connie off, threatened her life because we had to limit each family to three calamari burgers.”

“So we’ve seen,” Owen said. “There’s a fat lady out there with a nasty right hook.”

“What in the hell’s wrong with them?” Prescott said, face pressing close to Waylan’s. Two red eyes peered out from the deflated balloons of his cheeks.

“Nothing’s wrong with eating squid,” Waylan said. “Don’t pay any attention to Reeve—he’ll tell you they’re trash.”

Prescott and Owen traded tart-mouthed expressions.

“I meant,” Prescott said, “what’s wrong with people, Waylan.”

“People disappear,” Waylan said. “That’s a problem. Then they reappear, which you could argue is a much bigger problem.”

Prescott squinted at him for a long time, the kitchen still beleaguered with metallic chatter. “Y’all listen up, now,” he yelled at the ceiling. “Cooks, serve the fresh fillets only when you run out of the old. Assemblers, slap these ones together as fast as you can, and fryers, don’t forget to set your timers. And nobody better foul up till I get back.”

“You going home for some sleep?” Waylan said.

“Like hell. I’ve got to find Connie or our books won’t ever figure right.”

As Prescott stormed off toward his office, Waylan wondered if maybe some part of him would rather see this venture fail, too. He believed that in many ways, success was the far more terrifying possibility.

When their shifts ended, Waylan and Owen left as they’d come, trying not to meet eyes with the prospective eaters who stood about the restaurant. *Squid-lust*—it was corrupting people,

giving them horrible cravings, and Waylan was responsible. He'd created the product and so the demand for it. At first, he'd convinced himself that people were just concerned about the environment and wanted to cut down on squid numbers, but too many of them ended up dumping their trash in the parking lot.

A fresh squall line stood flat gray above the treeline, its winds already lifting riffs of lime dust from the lot. The customers tracked its progress with waning confidence. Vague threats and curses babbled up from this raw tapestry of hungry souls, but no one was ready to leave. Astonishing. They'd gladly brave the storm just for a bite of grilled squid.

Was there more to these people than that? Maybe if he focused his eyes just right, he'd see their collective desires laid out at their feet, like items confiscated from a pocket. What would that amount to? What did people really want? Please not just the burgers, please let there be more than that. He'd probably be able to answer these sorts of questions if it weren't for the mind-crippling pills. What was the benefit of taking them, anyway? Five years of medication hadn't made Reeve disappear. It was time for a sharper angle of attack.

One of the waiting customers in line stepped on another's foot, and there was a lot of shouting followed by an exchange of blows. The line of bodies wavered, then wavered in the opposite direction, a string of dominoes that couldn't quite fall all the way down.

## CHAPTER 25

The bicycle's brakes cried as he came to a stop, the feel of the rubber pads gummy through the handbrake. The asphalt warped under his shoes as he stood up from the seat. He braced the bike against a power pole, careful not to touch the oozing creosote. Wasn't even nine o'clock, but already the warm breeze carried whiffs of whatever dead marine life lay beyond the sandy berm, at the top of which, Waylan paused to hear the wind as it sifted through the sea oats, a kind of melancholy breathing that reminded him of his father. He was tired of feeling so wooden with medication. Pedaling the bike those few miles had pushed a burst of static into his vision, and now it was tough to focus.

He removed his shoes and followed a trail through the dunes and down to the coast. People in various stages of undress populated the beach between dead specimens of squid and jellyfish. Many of the beach people wore swimwear of patriotic colors, and some had planted American flags in the sand. Today was the Fourth of July, and in a few hours there'd be no vacant spots left on the beach, just bodies. They'd stay until well after sunset, when they'd cross over to the sound side and watch fireworks arc up over the water and make sizzling punctuations to a score of John Philip Sousa, which would play over one of the local radio stations. Waylan wasn't staying. He'd seen those fireworks all his life.

The water came over his toes and he wiggled them, pleased in spite of himself. Here, adults underwent a sort of retrograde metamorphosis to become children all over again. The sunbathers like giant babies drowsing in the sun. The retirees with skinny arms and inflated guts, their bodies spackled with melanoma, stirring to play with plastic flying discs, the myriad inflatable floats and balls and esoteric beach instruments. The Gulf itself a womb gone septic in the heat. Waylan withdrew his toes from the water.

He retrieved a plastic orange pill bottle from his pocket and read the tiny script once more, the impersonal directions and obscure numbers. A martini glass with a slash through it, just in case what?—he had any ambitions of becoming James Bond? He uncapped the bottle and gave it a brisk shake, watching the tiny maroon buttons slide out and sink in the clear water. The waves delivered them to shore and then drew them back. Before long they dissolved, and there was nothing else to see.

Cured at last.

## CHAPTER 26

Waylan angled his bicycle into the carport and saw that Sam's beach cruiser was missing. He surveyed the flat landscape and wondered where on it Bondy might live. Sam had been spending so many of her evenings there lately. The afternoon clouds had passed, the sky clear now, like it'd been rinsed with spring water. He was off his crummy medicine, and it was shaping up to be a good night for burying all the other junk that'd been weighing him down for so many years. One final gesture to put him at ease about leaving Gaston and help him revive those big city desires.

He ascended the attic stairs clutching an empty suitcase. His object was not clothes, but dusty boxes filled with yellowed photographs, childhood trophies, a prized toy boat, action figures with crazed and roadworn faces. He picked one of the plastic commandos from the miscellany, remembering how Reeve used to tie his action figures to his bicycle frame and tear off down the street, the toy grinding along and flailing, eerie and limber. When Reeve was satisfied with his victim's suffering, he'd stop the bike and ask was he ready to talk. Sometimes Reeve's captives divulged obscure secrets and he would release them. The less fortunate were bound in vests of firecrackers and duct tape. Waylan remembered how the plastic shrapnel would rain over the sidewalk when they blew.

"You're one of the lucky ones," Waylan said, adding the toy to his suitcase.

He rode out to the creek where it coursed through the lot he'd excavated so many months ago, the earth that bedded the Jenkins brothers for so many years. There was a new drugstore under construction near Lafitte's, and he paused to admire the fleet of new and gleaming excavators. So unsuspecting. Waylan stalked up behind them, toting his wares in a case so that he must've looked like a charlatan on tour. He climbed up into the cab, swinging his suitcase up

onto its floor like he was going to room there. The machine was an old model, perfumed with the lingering sweat of its operators, the vinyl seat well-threshed, yellow foam bulging through the split fabric. He carried no key, but from the suitcase, he lifted a large flathead screwdriver kept for just such a purpose. The excavator's make was unfamiliar to him, but it only took him a few moments to orient himself with the layout of the controls.

After a quarter mile, the treads turned against the weedy turf of the Lafitte's lot, and by then he was sweating good and steady. Waylan turned the handle of the screwdriver, cutting the ignition. He stepped down from the cab and listened to the reedy music of insects and farther away, the staticky surge of creek water. Here and there the flash of water showed between the weeds and bracken. Thin glass sickle of a moon tonight, so he'd work by the light of electric light poles set to shoo vagrants from the lot. Waylan stumbled down to the creek, clutching at reeds and bracken for balance. He had no hat, so instead he pulled off a shoe and dipped it full of creek water. He drank deeply, wiped his mouth, tasting the salt and the leather and the earth, like water ought to taste. He replaced his shoe and ambled back up the incline for the excavator, his left shoe farting and sucking against the foot as he walked.

The dull rumble of machinery relaxed him, the bucket clawing the earth with its simple grace, the ground transposed in layers, heavy scoops of earth in which worms turned and glistened, and waxy night insects, and once a young gopher tortoise, which he set upon the loose soil and watched until it rocked off of its weathered back and scuttled toward the moon. The sky was cellophane-snug and motionless, and the rumble of the excavator's engine sounded half-muffled, like it, too, would rather not startle the sleeping world.

When he'd pulled enough dirt, he flung open the glass door of the excavator and tossed out the suitcase, which spun down into the earth without a sound, falling forever. That was all.



And had anything changed? Did he feel any less of Reeve? He did not. Worse yet, he still couldn't work up a yearning for the big city. Those desires had been redirected elsewhere. His feet felt heavy as sandstone, and wouldn't have the strength to carry over the state line, even.

He was thinking of other, possibly bigger items to bury when twin lemon-colored beams of light angled across the lot and cut into the cab, pinning him there.

"Kill the engine," a sober voice told him. One of the light beams. The light could speak, could give commands.

"I'm not much of a killer," Waylan said.

"Cut the engine, smartass." The light wavered as it spoke.

Waylan began to speak, but then thought better of it. He twisted the screwdriver's handle and the engine sputtered and seized.

"Okay. Let's go."

"What are you?" Waylan said.

"What'd he say?" One of the beams vanished and Waylan saw that there were two men carrying flashlights in the dark. No sentient beams of light after all, which was too bad. The men wore snug uniforms and in the weak moonlight he could see the hard glint of the pistols they kept holstered about their waists. Authority figures. They were bringers of the law, which meant they also carried its brother, lawlessness. That could be a problem for Waylan, who would've preferred the talking lights.

Waylan stepped down from the excavator and did as he was asked until he felt the chilled metal loops ratchet over his wrists. The cruiser's interior smelled of scorched coffee and the nameless residues of a hundred detainees. Waylan smiled as he rode, his eyes straining to spot wild game through the sparse trees and the withered cacti. Tonight the animals convened

elsewhere. The policemen kept saying they wouldn't have to arrest him, and Waylan nodded in agreement. One of the men had a head like a pumpkin. The other was tapered like an eel.

"You fellas could be outlaws," Waylan said, smiling. "The pumpkin and the eel."

"Never seen him this out of sorts," the pumpkin said.

"Least he hasn't lost his touch on the excavator," the eel said.

He was escorted back home, where they invited themselves inside to speak with Sam. He tried his best to look concerned for the two policemen, who sat before him hatless and sipping tea, Sam posturing like an attorney, fist bouncing against her mouth. Everyone was taking everything so seriously.

The officers demonstrated his suitcase and dumped out the loose array of plastic figurines, picture frames, newspaper clippings. Waylan felt only marginally ashamed to see these objects out of context. Tears came to Sam's eyes, and she turned away from the officers, who gestured righteously to one another like they'd just performed the final coup of some ongoing trial.

"We were awful sorry about his brother," the eel said.

"And hell," the pumpkin said, "seemed to us like Waylan had been handling everything so well."

"Usually with an incident such like this we expect to find an assault weapon, maybe some kind of indicting legal document," the eel said. "Imagine our surprise when it was all just toys and the like."

"Certain folks are just prone to becoming buriers," the pumpkin said. "You'll find them burying all manner of things."

“There was Mrs. Hobart used to bury her trash for fear people might find out what she was eating for supper,” the eel said.

“There was Mrs. Hobart,” the pumpkin said, his enormous head bobbing. “Anyway, the upshot is Waylan used to work for the owner of the company, and he’s not pressing charges.” None of this was very interesting to Waylan. He’d bury Reeve’s belongings somewhere else, maybe put them out to sea like his pills. Matter of fact, there was a lot about Reeve he might put out to sea.

“Well I think it’s a healthy impulse,” Sam said to Waylan. “Shows you’re ready to move on.” He appreciated that. She didn’t talk about him like he was catatonic.

“You two ever heard of those Jenkins brothers?” Waylan said. They were the first words he’d spoken in a while, and the two officers looked at one another like they needed to confirm that it was in fact Waylan who spoke. Sam smiled, but her nose was doing its nervous tic.

“Why sure,” the pumpkin said. “Moonshiners. Hellcats. Wore gold teeth, as the legend has it.”

“Given the choice, I would’ve been one,” Waylan said. He held his hands before his face in the shape of an A-frame. “Not for fame or anything, and I know they weren’t good people. But just to be one of them. To feel like no matter what, you were a Jenkins through and through.”

The other three nodded along.

“I bet he’s ready for a good night’s sleep,” Sam said. Waylan nodded, assuming she meant one of the Jenkins brothers.

“Sleep is important,” Waylan said. “Sound of body, sound of mind.”

“I believe your man misses those Wild West days,” the pumpkin told Sam. His face had grown baggier. He was staring into his tea cup and tracing circles around its rim with his finger.

The eel laughed like a leaky tire.

“I don’t know what he misses,” she said. “He used to only talk about moving to Manhattan or Chicago. Guess lately he’s just been fixed on those local legends.”

“I need to be here,” Waylan said, pointing at the floor. “Where there’s still room, where the ground still has a pulse. The city forgets you too quickly. Besides, a sick man in the desert remains a sick man in the city.”

“Well I’m with you, Waylan,” the pumpkin said. “Hang them big cities and hang them hustlers and bustlers.”

“I don’t hate my era,” Waylan said, smiling at them. “Some days it just wears on me.”

“That’s called nostalgia,” Sam said. “Gives people silly ideas. A hundred years from now, people will look back at us and think we were quaint and romantic, too.”

“It’s the slow depletion of awe at the universe,” Waylan said. “No mythology to stand against science. All mysteries sold out like they were no more sacred than The Miser’s Dream.”

“My daddy taught me that trick when I was a boy,” the eel said. He looked up, a bit uneasily, then tapped a jazz figure on the brim of the hat in his lap.

“There are things about this world that we can’t unknow,” Waylan said. “Doesn’t that bother anyone?”

He stared at a trio of stony faces that weren’t listening, weren’t tuned in. He pitied them, these people who’d always miss what was important, what really mattered.

## CHAPTER 27

She made him promise not to leave the house except for work, and not really having anywhere to go, he agreed. In any case, he'd lost the nerve to drive, the roads were so thick with oryx, giraffe, Cape Buffalo, and—only on rarer occasions—rhinos that might've been hewed out of river stone. He began traveling by bicycle exclusively, singing as he rode so that the animals would clear a path for him. The motorists expressed no interest in this new irruption of wildlife, and it peeved him. One morning he came upon a black bear planted on the side of the highway. Waylan kept pedaling. It was too hot to turn back. The bear sat there with parted legs, tongue lolling, and gave his tire a sporting swat as he passed. You had to allow for the animals. They were here first, after all.

It was three miles north to Lafitte's in the relentless heat. He took to glowering at the cars that honked at him, whether they meant to jeer him or not. He menaced passing cars with an arm-length stick when they edged too close for his liking. The stick, he told Sam, was for fending off a territorial dog that stalked Plumeria Drive. The biking, he explained, was for exercise.

"Sound of body, sound of mind," he shouted, maybe a little too frequently.

As the medication left his system and made its way into the town's ground water, Waylan had begun noticing fine-grained details that he'd paid little attention to in recent years: the way the sunlight fired through the purple blooms of the narrow-bodied redbud trees along the highway. How the breeze teased the petals from the branches and spun them down like paper tops. The way the ocean actually smelled *green* at the distance of a quarter mile. Or—and he was noticing this more and more—the way Sam's breasts pressed against the smooth fabric of her dress. How her body always felt warm and inviting underneath. The easy contours of her legs, the supple weight of her lips and how they puckered while she slept.

Then there was something else he was just noticing about her: the way her eyes went dull with the enormity of her sadness when she thought he wasn't watching. He didn't know exactly what to make of that, but he was pretty sure he could make her happy again. Now sans medication, he carried the sort of thin-spun hopefulness that came from feeling pretty embodied, pretty immediate for the first time in a long time.

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Waylan bent over the grill and pushed the sputtering squid patties back and forth with a spatula. He was two hours into the lunch shift, and still sweating profusely from the bike ride. Even his apron had gone dark. Two-legged figures emerged and receded in the steam of a misfiring dishwasher, their footfalls clicking against the tile floor. Anonymous vegetable rinsers and slicers. Crafty-eyed teenagers, most of them. Dull hammer blows as they punched out squid fillets, which were delivered to Waylan's station for finishing.

Owen stood across from him, working in the steam of grilled scallops. His face was tan from harvesting the squid, his lean arms knotted with new muscle. They'd barely spoken all afternoon. A trickle of sweat ran down Waylan's arm and dropped from the end of his spatula. The grill hissed and gave off a little rosette of steam, like some kind of magic trick. Owen's face wrinkled and skewed as he walked over to Waylan's station.

"Here," Owen said, passing him a clean dish towel. "Somebody's going to get sick if you're not careful."

Waylan blotted his forehead with the towels and continued poking at the squid patties. Now unmedicated, his brain and his glands were busy rekindling all sorts of latent appetites that the pill years had blunted. What he needed now was an adventure of some kind. But he'd have to

get the hell out of Lafitte's to find it. He finished cooking the patties and dressed them up, then he walked over to Owen's station.

"Tell me what you know about cicadas," Waylan said.

"What?"

"You know they live underground for seventeen years? *Seventeen*. Then they climb to the surface for a few short weeks of fresh air." Waylan motioned to the ceiling, his hands cupped and making digging motions.

"You're not making much sense."

"In fact I'm making the most sense." Waylan winked at him and spread his arms. "We want the same things as the cicadas, Owen."

Owen nodded for Waylan to continue.

"To live. To dig free. To breathe the air and feel the sunlight and then return to the soil. Mostly, we lust."

"We lust?"

Waylan grinned. "Biological imperatives and what-not."

"Mr. Prescott thinks Sam's pregnant. Did you tell him that?" He didn't like Owen's combative tone. Here Waylan was, trying to explain something important, and the kid was flirting with some kind of power struggle he couldn't possibly win.

"She's as good as pregnant, Owen."

"But she's not, is she? So it's as good as a lie."

"Your problem is you worry too much."

"That's my problem?"

Waylan snapped his fingers and pointed at Owen, who was finally starting to understand.

“Your problem is you’re losing it,” Owen said. “You won’t fish. You’re late to work. You just stand there for hours staring at the wall and muttering to yourself.”

“What if I do? Think you’re the boss now?”

“If I was, I’d have cut you by now. Only reason he’s let you off the hook so far is he thinks Sam’s pregnant. What happens when he finds out you’re a liar?”

Waylan’s lip quivered as he studied Owen, grasping for some hint of vulnerability, some flaw that he could exploit. “You tell him,” Waylan said, “and I will by God make you sorry.”

Waylan brought his face close to Owen’s, bared his teeth like he imagined an angry ape might. Owen just smiled at him, and it wasn’t the familiar boyish grin. This was a wry smile that would rival that of the seediest boardwalk carnie.

Waylan returned to his station, trying to step as casually as he could. Owen still hadn’t moved, just stood there wagging a spatula. Little shit was chiding him, but what was it supposed to mean? Implicit threat of spatular violence?

One of the prep guys delivered a fresh pile of wet squid fillets to Waylan’s station. They sat in his plastic mixing bowl, fibrous and glycerine-white, just begging to be cooked. The worm was shifting around like it did whenever Waylan had a good idea. He picked up the bowl of squid fillets and rushed over to Owen’s station, stopping at a heaping bowl of fry batter. If his plan worked out, he could knock off without even getting in trouble.

Waylan dropped the fillets into the batter one after another and turned them over and over, patting so that the mixture adhered. Owen watched. When Waylan had finished battering the entire bowl, he cocked an eyebrow at Owen and grinned.

“What’re you doing with those?”



Waylan winked. He loaded the squid fillets into a fry basket and sent it down into the roiling vat. Bubbling oil closed over the basket and the two of them stood watching. Rich seafood smells welled. Waylan's eyes grew heavy, and despite Owen's sour-puss face, the boy seemed more like his old self. Waylan dragged up the basket and dumped out a set of fillets fried to an appealing wheaty hue. He selected the fattest of the steaks and cut it into strips, which he sprinkled with lemon juice and painted with tartar sauce and divided between himself and Owen, who took a begrudging nibble of his portion, then ate the remainder in a single greedy bite.

"So?" Waylan narrowed his eyes at Owen.

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"They're not bad."

"You're goddamn right they're not bad. In fact they're even better this way."

Owen frowned at the fillets.

"Say it, Owen. Say that they're even better this way." He felt it was important that he reaffirm his status: Waylan Dranger, Squidmaster at Large. Not that he wanted a whole lot of authority. He just couldn't stand the idea of Owen having more than him.

"Yeah, fine."

"Okay, then. Inform the captain that we're serving them deep-fried from now on. It's easier, it's faster, and it tastes better. This town can have its collective heart attack sooner than later."

"But why should I tell him, Waylan?"

"I'm an idea man. I can't stay today. Prior obligations."

"You can't just come and go whenever you want. Who'll work the grill?"

“Nobody. You’ve graduated to fryer. Today we all move up a rung.”

“You don’t have the authority.”

“When you’re making your boss as much bread as I am, you can leave when it’s time to leave. And don’t think I haven’t got a million other ideas just as good as this one. The only rule of any relationship: make yourself needed.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Indispensable, you mean.”

“Sam doesn’t need you. Neither does Prescott and neither do I.”

Waylan licked his lips. Little shit liked to get personal, did he? “You might need me more than you think next time you get your ass beat out at the boardwalk.” Felt good, shouting like that. He might start doing it more often.

Owen’s eye started twitching, like it could remember being punched. “Waylan. Listen. You’re out of control.”

Waylan began to speak, but in his exasperation his head lolled forward and the only gesture he could manage was to shake his fist. Slowly, Waylan made himself good and tall. He cracked open his eyes with painful deliberation.

“Plain Jane,” Waylan said.

“Plain what?”

“Plain Jane Fairchild. That should’ve been your name.” Waylan wagged his sorrowful head. “You’ll learn to regret the risks you don’t take.”

“Well thanks for the bumper sticker philosophy, but listen, don’t leave me to run the place by myself. It’s too much today. What I said about Sam—it was out of line, and I’m sorry. But you can’t just leave.”

Waylan cleared the sweat from his brow. He picked up a collapsible steel vegetable steamer and tested its closure, the perforated steel petals spreading open and spiraling away from the iris-like center. Owen cleared his throat.

“It is too much,” Waylan said, “and I am sorry. But I have to go.”

He gave the steamer a spin, and they both watched it whirl.

#

He sweated out the miles back home, the highway a blackened tongue that urged him upright as it spun its lusty breath. His eyes boggled at the thought of seeing her. He wanted to fall into her gray eyes, taste her for the first time, all over again. He tugged at the front of his pants and swore aloud at their tightness.

Seeing the house sobered him for reasons he didn't really understand. Call it a premonition, the atmosphere and its particles charged with all the wrong valencies. Mainly it was the silence, the windows occluded with their heavy canvas blinds. Whole house was scowling at him, eyes impenetrable. He paused at the doorstep.

Scraps of brightly-colored paper littered the floor of the den. Waylan's heart listed over in his chest and inverted, began draining his organs rather than filling them. He sank to his knees and selected a wad of wrapping paper. Balled up fist-tight. He smoothed its creases and studied the pink and blue cartoon bears, their paws tethered to balloons. Waylan squinted to clear the sweat from his eyes and followed the trail of scrap paper to the large cardboard box sitting in the middle of the den. Its artwork depicted a grinning infant harnessed to a sort of chair hung from elastic straps. Not unlike a hanging planter.

He felt eyes on him, gunning pimento holes into the back of his head, and when he turned around, she was watching him with an evenness that unnerved him more thoroughly than Reeve ever had, living or dead, her crooked nose doing its fresh roadkill dance.

“Had an interesting talk with your boss today,” she said. Not good. She wasn’t even going to lead into it, just gnash right into the major arteries.

Waylan raised up to his knees, but he’d venture no further.

“He was really worried about us.”

Waylan stole a glance, began to speak.

“What with me carrying your baby and all,” she said, cutting him off. “Well?”

“Sweetie, it was a moment of—”

“Sweetie nothing, Waylan. You played him for sympathy.”

He nodded, felt his head filling up with microwaved sand.

“Because you needed to explain why you’ve been flaky at work. Is that it?”

“But the calamari burgers,” he said, raising a finger.

“You were nearly arrested, you stare at me like a pervert, and Nels says you’ve been coming and going whenever you please. It’s time to see the doctor.”

Waylan glared up at her from the floor. “The hell I will. I never felt better.”

“You’re off your medicine.”

“What if I am?”

“You can’t just quit cold turkey because you feel like it. You know that.” A momentary wave of compassion relaxed her mouth. “It’s a condition, Waylan. If you were diabetic you wouldn’t be ashamed to take insulin.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is. You didn’t do anything to deserve this. Just chemicals in the brain. Too much of this, too little of that.”

“I can get the better of a few little chemicals.”

“You can’t. I thought we’d both accepted that.” She glanced at the unopened box, her eyes softening. “*I am as I am*. That’s what you used to say to me.”

“Forget him. Forget that person. This is me, your lover. You want passion?” He pointed to his heart, felt it hammer and quake beneath the breastbone. “Here’s passion. Here’s a fire. I’m awake again, Sam.”

He flashed a smile and she shuddered. Her nose wasn’t endearing anymore. Just ugly and inhospitable—a hazardous summit for flea-sized mountaineers. Waylan came to his feet and staggered forward, his arms held open for an embrace, but she kept backing away, her gray eyes touched with fire now.

“Remember how we’d watch the storms?” he said.

She stepped backwards into the bedroom. “We’re calling the doctor. First thing tomorrow morning.”

She shut the door behind her, but for a few moments he lingered in the space she’d occupied, his arms still slightly parted. Surely she’d open the door, argue with him some more. He waited, but before long the gap of light beneath the door went dark and the room fell silent.

He sat in the recliner and tried watching public access. Tonight featured a particularly odd pastiche of amateur music videos, used car commercials, and a short segment showcasing an inept ventriloquist whose fat-faced puppet reminded Waylan of Reeve and his talking squid. That made him giggle, though he did so very quietly, so Sam wouldn’t hear. The broadcast segued abruptly from the ventriloquist to old interview footage of Connie the archaeologist. She was

standing inside her museum discussing the Jenkins brothers, detailing their roughshod legacies and the process by which she'd plasticized their bare skeletons. Goddamn travesty. Connie rambled on, flashing her best show-time smile, pausing and nodding at the proper moments, refraining from her usual vulgarities. Waylan cursed her and switched off the TV. Bad enough knowing they were constrained inside that museum, even without her gloating about it all the time.

For the better part of an hour, he sat leaning back in the recliner and tried to sleep. No use. Too silent, too dark, and his nerves hummed with excess voltage. The Jenkins brothers were suffering undue humiliation, their infamy now reduced to a bland museum exhibit designed for the express purpose of boring schoolchildren, who would definitely corrupt the Old West exhibits with their spit-wads, their smeared boogers. Then off to the concession stand for a Gaucho Kabob, finally exiting through the gift shop clutching some injection-molded plastic commodification of the Old West. Felt like something close to a sin, though he'd never cared for that word, wouldn't have spoken it out loud.

He spent his next hours in the art room, armed with a drill and a wrench. He rifled through the cluttered shelves and plastic bins until he'd collected a pair of roller skates, the front trucks and pull handle of a wagon, and what would pass for a gurney. He was still opposed to driving the car—it moved too fast, made too much racket—so he figured the bicycle would be a better choice. Besides, it made for a more intimate ride. You got to actually feel yourself there on the landscape, breathing honest air.

## CHAPTER 28

It was after midnight when he arrived downtown on his bicycle, wheeled gurney in tow, its black pull handle bolted to the seat. A single spade-headed shovel lay on the gurney, its steel blade reflecting the light of a moon so gravid it might birth a litter of sub-moons. The wind came warm and damp, dragging loose papers and cups into the street.

The museum sat between a movie theater and a jeweler's shop, its marquee lettered with an old frontier font and illustrated with Old West oil renderings, the deserts and the cacti and the square-chinned cowboys with their Anglo faces, none of them real, none of them real.

He propped his bike against the crumbling brick exterior and trotted to the end of the block. He peeked around the corner, careful not to reveal too much of himself. A patrol car idled in the vacant lot behind the museum, its engine droning like an electric shaver. There was the downtown night watchman. Waylan could just make him out behind the wheel. Looked like he was working on a crossword puzzle.

“Sleep is important,” Waylan whispered. “Sound of body, sound of mind.”

He smiled and followed the hedge to the front of the building. A sign in the grass warned of an anti-burglary system, but he knew Connie still hadn't figured out how to program it. In any case, no threat of alarm, tangible or otherwise, could've deterred him tonight. His was so righteous a cause. Who'd have the heart to arrest him?

He studied the door for a long time before sliding the screwdriver from his pocket. It was an old building, the paint showing vertical splits, but the door was solid hardwood. No, this would never work. You couldn't just go in through the front door—that was too straight of a line. He'd have to find a more indirect point of entry.

He turned and crept around the corner to find a side window obscured by hedges. Turning his attention to the frail window-frame, he backed out a few screws—careful not to strip them—and pulled away the frame rails. Before long he was able to lean the lower window-pane into his arms without breaking it. He left the glass angled against the side of the building. Then he began crawling head-first through the window, cooler air blowing against his face, his heart misfiring painfully in his chest. Helium flooded his head, but his body felt strong, frenetic. He liked the hot little adrenaline spikes, the steam and sparks kicking around in his bloodstream. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so thrilled about anything.

He slid through the open frame on his belly and laid himself likewise on the hardwood flooring. When he'd caught his breath, he stood and pulled a plastic flashlight from his pocket and flicked the switch. The feeble light revealed a well-polished stage coach, the wooden hoops of its wheels glossy with wax under the light, its burgundy coach resting buoyantly on blade-like springs. Two country-western mannequins occupied the driver's box. They were wooden and silent, whipping unseen horses. He'd have driven the wagon home, were it just a little less conspicuous. He didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention. And anyway, he wasn't sure he'd like to play the part of those absent horses.

He directed the flashlight down the hallway and flinched at what stared back. A bison observed him with bovine disinterest, its enormous forequarters pitched downward in a manner that was both hostile and submissive. Unlike the bison he often spotted out by the highway, this one wasn't moving. Waylan came down the hallway and met it with an outstretched hand. He ran his fingers through the shaggy mane, the beard. He lost himself in the glassy eyes, tested their depth with the light. The musty smell of the taxidermied creature undid him, and for a time he buried his face in the coarse mane and wept quietly. Wasn't fair that they all had to disappear—



the buffalo, the fearsome mountain cats, the passenger pigeons that flocked so heavily they darkened the sky and left trees crippled where they roosted. Wasn't right that there was so much of the world he'd never get to see.

The Jenkins brothers occupied the largest room in the museum. They stood side by side on an elevated display stage, baring their gleaming gold teeth to the empty room. Waylan set the butt of the flashlight on the floor of the stage and propped it against a placard so that it pitched light at the three of them. Then he climbed onto the stage and stood among them and their Old West terrene. Connie had arranged it all so wrong. Too sterilized, too predictable. Waylan kicked a prop tumbleweed, trapping his foot in its hollow core. He tore the prop off its mount and flicked his leg dog-like until it came free. And here was the phony rattlesnake he'd seen from the news report, the serpent-in-the-garden with curved fangs ready to strike. Waylan took hold of the rattle end of the snake and fed it to the poisonous mouth, so that now it was swallowing its own tail. Much better that way.

Waylan began turning slow circles, fingers drawn to his mouth. He looked the brothers over and adjusted their hats and bandoliers. There was so little honesty in this rotten museum. Maybe the only truth left was the fact that what had been lost wasn't coming back. He took a place beside the shortest of the three brothers and draped an arm over the stiff shoulder. He stood there for a long time, gazing where they gazed, the museum silent and dark except for the quaking cone of light his flashlight produced. The youngest Jenkins brother posed with an unlit cigar to his mouth, but Waylan hadn't thought to bring a lighter.

“You must be Giles,” Waylan said. “Brother, we've got to light that cigar.”

#

They came down the highway at top speed, Waylan smiling and hollering, all three Jenkinses in tow on the gurney, which was so short that at times their boot heels dragged. Passing drivers slowed as they overtook him on the road, maybe trying to see what sort of person was carting home three gaucho corpses at such an hour, but as soon as Waylan began waving and shouting they throttled their engines and cut away, leaving dark miles of highway between themselves and his convoy. Twice, Waylan took a corner too sharply, overturning the gurney and its riders. Waylan laughing, apologizing to everybody as he resituated the Jenkinses and replaced whatever effects they'd lost in the tumble.

Before long, they approached Lafitte's and the old burial lot where he'd first brushed their caskets with the excavator's bucket. The restaurant sat vacant and dark, save the gravel parking lot, which gave back the light of the moon. It was a shame that their graves had to be so close to this eyesore, but it still beat Connie's counterfeit museum. Waylan angled the bike away from the road and he and the Jenkinses came down a steep scree that leveled off and sloped gently toward the creek. He stopped pedaling and just let the bike coast. It was rough going, the brothers rattling in their gurney, the odd rock or root knocking underneath as they rumbled along.

They'd come to a small rise when he spotted a loose flotilla in the creek below, four of them planted in inflatable rubber tubes and chained together with thin rope, a fifth ring trailing behind riderless and with a foam cooler in its center. Waylan gripped the brakes and came to a stop. They looked barely out of high school, three benevolent drunk faces smiling up at the moon and then at Waylan, whose eyes grew wide when he spotted the glow of a lit cigarette between one girl's fingers. The fourth member rode on his belly with his hair dragging in the water. He appeared to be dead. So they'd lost a member. Still, you had to admire their determination, their

willingness to make certain sacrifices in order to keep the expedition going. The other three, who were very much alive, waved as they passed, regarding Waylan with what he took for youthful optimism. He stepped off the bike and trotted after them.

“Understand that they don’t belong in a museum,” he shouted, thumb angled back at the gurney. “And they never will.”

Three drunken cheers welled up from the creek. So they understood! Even the dead man withdrew his head from the water and hitched up his safari hat to see Waylan. When he’d seen enough, the guy dragged the brim down over the top of his head until it became a wilted flower. His body twitched and shuddered and he began vomiting long ropes of what looked like blueberry jam. The dead man’s friends laughed and shrugged and offered upturned palms to Waylan, who was still jogging, gaining on them. He motioned to the smoker.

“Toss me a light? Giles needs one last smoke before he gets buried proper.”

The smoker took a speculative drag on her cigarette.

“We got an extra, Dorey,” someone slurred. “Give him. Shit. Give him what he takes.”

A blue plastic lighter skipped past Waylan’s feet. Remarkable accuracy, for a drunk. He thanked them abundantly and watched the creek freight their ponderous floats around the next bend, where ring by ring they hooked leftward and disappeared. Waylan flicked the wheel and tested the flame. He tested it once more and made his way back to where he’d dumped the bicycle.

They stopped at the burial grounds, where Waylan propped the Jenkinses up against the side of the gurney. Everyone sat with crossed legs. Giles still carried the cigar between his faux gold teeth. Waylan pried it loose and bit the tip off the mouth end. When the cigar was lit, he passed it around to the brothers and helped himself to a few drags. The four of them sat smiling

at the enormous moon and the creek that raveled below like drawn glass. Waylan figured he'd been born postmature by at least two hundred years.

Using the point of the shovel, he hewed a rough outline in the ground. Then he pressed deeper, feeling the roots of the dollar- and milkweed break under the weight of his foot. Tears came down his cheeks, and he let them come. He dug on, and when he could no longer reach the floor of the hole with ease, he stepped down into the humid earth and dug from there, the ground a slow-blooded creature ingesting him as the shovel carved out a cross-section in sand and sediment and the occasional rot-softened tree root.

Daylight had broken over the pines when he lifted out the last shovelful. He hoisted himself up from the squared and dank void, his eyes adjusting to the knife slash of sunlight over in the east. One by one, he took up the Jenkins brothers in his arms and lowered them down as delicately as possible into the grave, where they made a loose pile on the floor. Waylan smiled down at them as he backfilled the dirt. Everyone in his rightful place.

They were safe from the indignities of museum life, but even now he sensed that there was something equally unfulfilling about this ritual. Weren't the Jenkinses wasted in the ground, after all? Through their vitality and their savage nature, they'd approached a kind of godliness, and here he'd buried them all over again. Maybe that meant that he wasn't done yet, that he was between two phases of a greater plan. Whatever happened next, he hoped the end would see the full reanimation and reintegration of the Jenkinses. Lofty plans, but Waylan knew he could see them through if he kept trying. The Jenkinses could stay in their graves for a while, just maybe not forever. He'd have to complete other tasks in the meantime, prepare the world for their resurrection. Standing there, he wished the ground might yield them up fully animated right now,

him blasted with flung soil, them cursing out of general principle and firing their pistols at whatever they dared—at the moon itself, should it operate against their interests.

He waited, but nothing happened. Just a mound of soil, slightly raised, slightly dark. So he left their hats on the broken ground and fitted a river stone into the crease of each crown. Then he considered how questionable this looked and collected the hats to wear on his own head in a single heavy stack. His heartbeat was still good and rapid. What would Sam think of him now, behaving like a proper outlaw? Maybe he'd get to spend some quality time with her while he coordinated his next move.

He watched a bloodshot sun clamber up over the treeline. Spines of light fell on the distant fields, and soon, broken patterns of gold stippled the creek surface. Trees and weeds threw long shadows across the lot. Waylan's own shadow angled out from the heels of his shoes and leaned from the creek at a hard angle. He turned around and sized it up. Blank and famished image of the Old West, trying so hard to pull free.

## CHAPTER 29

Waylan swung the bedroom door open until there was space enough to see inside. He had to open it pretty wide, since he was still wearing one of the Jenkins brothers' hats, probably Abram's. He could discern through the drawn blinds the shape of a squat sun. The fan blades cut their circles against the ceiling. Sam slept on, her legs and arms flung to opposite corners, the pale skin of her neck exposed. Waylan could smell her, a fragrance of clean linen, of soap and wine. The worm stirred, but Waylan ignored it.

He stood watching her until she wiggled under the covers and turned over to face him, eyes still closed. Waylan reeled like a drunk and came aboard the mattress. He crawled to her on all fours, his fingertips flying under the sheets. He ducked—hat and all—underneath, and permitted himself to the dark and perfumed world within. Sam began murmuring in soft, inquisitive tones. He began with the skin of her calves, kissing tenderly and working his way up the inside of her legs, stubble bristling his lips. When he came to her thighs, she was good and awake, her moaning so pained that he feared she was hurt. She was not. She worked her fingernails into the skin of his neck and hauled with such force that his face was driven swiftly between her thighs, stifling whatever cries of protest or enthusiasm he might've voiced.

They twined together for what felt like hours, and he would not hear of stopping until fatigue set his limbs all trembly. When they finally separated again, the room held a fierce light and in the heat they slept like two feverish cats, chests heaving. Waylan could feel the radiant heat of his own blood as it made the rounds with renewed gusto. He dozed off again, and dreamed that he was swimming in from the Gulf, urged coastward by heavy waves. His body floated easy as pumice, like he'd shed the terrible gravity of all those pills, all those doctor's notes, the undelivered weather report. When he walked out of the water, he'd be a more buoyant

kind of man. A telephone kept ringing under the waves, making the water ripple. Waylan kept trying to answer, but the receiver slipped from his hands and sank into deeper waters.

When Waylan woke again, the room was dark. He groaned delightedly and ran a hand through the tousled sheets, but she wasn't there. He heard her voice coming from the den, low and immodulate. He climbed to his unsteady legs. Lifting the blinds, he observed with some newfound optimism the sunless world outside, white-hot stars bleeding feeble light into the great dark like they might somehow fill it up. He studied the heavens, saw how those vast distances made chaos appear orderly. He turned back to the unkempt sheets and chuckled quietly to himself.

By the time he shuffled into the den—his legs were still wobbly—she was already gone. The telephone rang on two different occasions, but when he answered there was only the sound of what might have been a sigh followed by a dial tone. Waylan could have worked up all kinds of conspiratorial explanations for that dial tone, but he tried not to.

Sam returned carrying plastic bags of ice and strawberries and bread for sandwiches. They loaded these goods into a foam cooler along with a jar of moonshine Bondy had given her. He didn't necessarily appreciate the details of its origins, but moonshine was moonshine, and she so rarely encouraged him to drink. They rode in the moonlight down a pitted dirt road off the main highway, Balthazar leaning through the window, jowls flapping obscenely. A plume of dust turned in their wake like the tail of an elegant koi. Where the road ended, a trail began that led them down to the broadest bend of the creek. A rope swing hung from the branches of a gray oak hung with hag moss. They took turns swinging in long arcs and dropping deep into the cool creek water, their feet bracing against the silt and stones, reflected stars wobbling and scattering.

Balthazar patrolled the banks with his nose pressed to the ground, rapt with doggish delight. Waylan dug the jar of moonshine from the cooler and hefted it in his palm. Moisture beaded on the surface of the glass. He ran a fingertip over the scripted lettering, felt the weight of the cool liquid inside. He unscrewed the lid and sipped. An instant passed. He wheezed and sputtered, sure that he'd sucked down the lining of his throat along with that swallow of—could you actually call this stuff booze? Residual fumes smoldered in his sinuses, then a slow-rolling numbness.

“Like rubbing alcohol,” he finally said, passing the jar to Sam.

She took a dainty sip and held the jar up to the moon. The liquid sloshed, and an instant later, she closed her eyes and gagged.

“That’s an insult to rubbing alcohol.”

Waylan smiled and narrowed his eyes at her. She giggled and winked, and Waylan’s head swam, napalmed raw. He pulled her close. Christ, he was lucky. He helped her out of her wet clothes, and then she helped him out of his. They made love, Waylan smiling down at her or smiling up at her, teeth and eyes flashing silver in the moonlight.



## CHAPTER 30

Jefferson followed the painted yellow line until it terminated amid a cluster of blown-out auditorium seats. He tipped down the spring-loaded seats one by one until he'd determined which was stained and torn the least. He sat, grateful to escape the boardwalk heat, but not that grateful. The theater smelled like a farty old gymnasium. His only other company was a pair of furtive teenagers who'd probably rather not be noticed. Jefferson, on the other hand, very much hoped to be noticed, namely by Bondy. He'd chatted with the Myles kid again, and Myles had said he'd find her here. And then Myles had said something about a third arm that Jefferson didn't really understand. Weird kid. You couldn't always follow him when he talked, and sometimes you weren't even sure you'd want to even if you could.

Jefferson sensed that uncovering just a little more information on Waylan could lead him to the salve that his fizzling career so badly needed. He still had a few friends in the business. His acting coach, Margaret Ginnis, who'd once starred in a commercial for pistachio-flavored ice cream, had said Jefferson was one of her more promising students. *A kid who truly has no past*, she'd said, *Someone to watch out for*. Maybe Margaret wasn't super high on the industry food-chain, but if Jefferson could just get the right people interested, maybe someone would make a movie about all of this, and he could get a role playing himself. He was also willing to admit that part of him just wanted to know more. Nothing wrong with a little curiosity. Waylan's was a pretty strange story, and some part of it resonated with Jefferson in a way he didn't understand, like hearing a certain song on the radio and knowing some of the words to the chorus, though you were pretty sure you'd never heard it before. Truth was, he worried he might be worse off than Waylan. Acting had left him distrustful of his own memories. A few years ago, he'd starred in a film produced by some UT Austin kids. His character was Mark Treadwell, a guy who

became convinced that human civilization was all part of some elaborate simulation, and that history—Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, whatever—was all a fabrication. The film played at only one festival, and most of the half-dozen attendees didn't stay for the third act, but Jefferson had committed so deeply to the role that even long after post-production, he couldn't bear to watch a period film without grinding his teeth at the falsity of it all, just like Treadwell would have. Spending time with Waylan had cued up painful associations, feelings of abandonment and peril at sea, but were those blips and flashes rooted in the bedrock of something that actually happened, or had he become so adept an actor that he was improvising without even realizing it?

Jefferson sat through Milo the Clown's routine feeling kind of detached, like he was watching it all through frosted glass. The hell was he supposed to do—clap? He craved direction. When Milo capered forward, aiming his flower, Jefferson gave the clown a look that shied him back to the shadows.

He nearly dozed during Drake the Bearded Baby's act, the tiny man darting back and forth across the stage on a tiny red tricycle. The bastard clown gave surreptitious grins and winks to the audience while he laid down nasty pitfalls for little Drake, who'd invariably negotiate whatever collapsible ramp or handful of thumbtacks or grease puddle the clown had laid out, leaving Milo to injure himself when he came back to investigate his own malfunctioning gags. Jefferson felt like he'd seen this all before in cartoon form.

He'd all but stood to leave when the announcer finally called her to the stage—the Octopus Woman. She emerged dressed as a ballerina in a bright green leotard. She moved with a measured grace that defied the fact that this was Bondy—cold, graceless Bondy. Somehow her body had gone liquid-loose with the additional arm. She danced like she was underwater, and almost immediately, Jefferson felt a terrible warmth grip his loins. He crossed his legs to cover

the scandalous bulge. This was unacceptable—arousal that hadn't even met with his consent. A man ought to be in control of his faculties.

He'd only come to milk her for information about Waylan, but now—he could feel it happening—he was smitten. Or maybe not so much smitten as intrigued. And why? It wasn't the additional arm, not really. The arm was made out of putty or plastic or something. How she *used* the arm—the concert of fluid movement—that was what undid him. Her conviction, her body's full and unwavering insistence that here was no vulgar sideshow act, but a legitimate marvel. He leered, not even trying to hide it. Their eyes locked as she danced and then she glanced away, and though he wasn't sure, he thought that seeing her there inspired her to turn smoother pirouettes and strike more exultant postures than before.

After the show ended, Jefferson sat in the darkness until the lit end of her cigarette parted the curtains like a coal burning at the end of a string. The stage lights conjured her body from thin air. She was outfitted now with only two arms, and he was kind of surprised at her plainness. She took a drag and nodded at him, apparently well-accustomed to this reaction.

"I don't guess you waited this long to talk to the clown," she said. And there was that same unsexy monotone. She sounded like one of those burnt-out hairdressers. Was that what she sounded like *during*? He didn't know if he'd have the stomach for it.

"Didn't figure on finding you here. But no, I'm not concerned with him."

"What, then?"

"I just don't want you thinking I rigged it so as to see you."

"Never said you did."

"Okay, then."

"Okay then what?"

Jefferson wrung his hands and exhaled in the dark. Bondy took another drag on her cigarette and came down laboriously in the seat beside him. This woman sat like she was doing the chair a favor.

“Thought maybe you’d like to have a drink with me,” Jefferson said.

She took a drag on her cigarette, like she’d have to think about that. Hard to tell if she was scowling or just squinting against the smoke.

#

He woke in an unfamiliar room and felt her face hot against his breastbone. Faint odor of sour wine and the wrappers from greasy calamari burgers they’d eaten the night before, while famished and drunk. He lifted his head in hopes of finding a clock, and for a brief moment he thought a hideous dream had snared him. He’d not seen them the night before, but now with the sun up he could see all the plaster arms that sprang from the windowsills and nightstands and a number of the room’s flat surfaces, elbows cocked so that they angled inward toward the bed, the digits gracefully curled, beckoning him from sleep in mock seduction.

Their outing had felt wrong from the beginning, her shaking that judgmental head at his inane questions. He learned nothing useful about Waylan. In fact, she hardly spoke at the bar, only nodded woodenly as he carried on about what past he could remember or fabricate, what recent slights and embitterments sprang to mind. His vision went paint-flecked back at her place, and though he couldn’t work out precisely what’d gone where, he was pretty sure they incorporated her third arm into their little romp, which—he felt pretty sure—had made its way onto the floor and into the kitchen before spilling onto the front lawn.

Now Bondy lay on her side with her forehead pressed against his shoulder. Dear God, he should just leave. Parts of him were sore that should never be sore.

“What’s the matter?” Even her whisper sounded rough.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Why do you keep all these arms hanging around?”

“Run off the philistines.”

“Aren’t they all alike anyway?”

“Philistines?”

“The arms, I mean.”

“Each casting comes out different. You might say each piece has a different attitude.”

“Seems like a lot of attitude for just the one room.”

“Guess if I ever make one that’s perfect I can throw the rest out.”

Jefferson squinted. “Haven’t you come close enough already with these?”

“I think you’re missing my sarcasm here, Jeff. It’s not about making the perfect arm.”

“No?” Did she honestly think he could tell when she was being sarcastic?

“It’s more about creating a great many imperfect ones.”

He thought about that, but didn’t get very far.

“Never mind,” she said.

“Sort of like the flaws is what makes them good?”

“Sure. Something like that.” She reached across the bed and collected the telephone receiver from the nightstand. She dialed slowly, her eyes straining. “The perfect arm, see that’d look too fake. It’d ruin the show.”

“Who you calling?”

Bondy patted his groin, as if that would offer reassurance.

“You’re not a stupid man,” she said. “Least, not as stupid as you pretend to be. I shouldn’t have to put it all together for you.”

He could hear the line ringing through the earpiece. She let it ring for several minutes, then dropped the receiver back onto its cradle and huffed.

“Not you and Waylan?” he said.

He didn’t have to see her to know she was rolling her eyes.

“You and her?” he said.

Bondy turned over and mumbled.

“You should say your words,” Jefferson said. “Hell has a special pit set aside for the muttersome.”

She twisted about and flung the covers half open. “All I said was I’ll not be judged in my own bed by some wannabe actor masquerading as one who’s known to be dead.”

“Actor,” he said. “Anyway I wasn’t judging. I don’t give a damn either way.”

“No?”

He motioned with outspread hands to show how expansive his apathy really was. She disappeared under the covers and turned away from him. A vinegar taste worked its way up his throat. He didn’t like those goddamn plaster arms. He wished Waylan had more friends who weren’t artists. He had an overwhelming desire to flee Bondy and her terrible bed as quickly as possible. She wasn’t asleep, he knew that. She’d probably demand to know where he was going, and what would he say?

He studied the arms again. Could he, catapulting himself from the bed, gain enough momentum to pass them by, or would they, with their stony digits, seize him by the shoulder, the

hair? As if sensing his discomfort, Bondy gave a loud snort and pressed her oven-warm ass up against him.

## CHAPTER 31

The phone had been ringing, maybe for hours. Among whipped bedcovers, Waylan smiled and coiled his arms about Sam's waist. He felt the muscles of her back draw taut. Waylan rolled onto his belly. Sam was already awake. For a moment longer, she watched the ceiling fan. Then she shut her eyes and turned away. She was teasing him. He chuckled and snuggled closer, and that's when she started bawling and shuddering with a fury he'd never seen before. She refused to lift her face from her pillow. When he finally convinced her to turn over, he saw that the gray weather contained in her eyes had deteriorated. Darker storms spun from the tight black middles, the whites fire-licked. No compassion in there, not anymore. Her pillow was all blotted up with mascara.

"You're wearing makeup," he said, watching the inky tears flick down her cheeks.

She pursed up her mouth and nodded.

"Where you going?"

"I'm leaving you." She said it with such confidence, such finality, emphasizing the *you*, just in case he was confused about who was doing what. *I'm. Leaving. You.* Waylan concentrated hard on those four little syllables, their brevity, their magnitude. Then Sam climbed from the bed and kneeled, and he could hear the little metal dial of the safe ticking as it spun. When she stood again, she held a modest handful of their savings. As she left the bedroom, he felt the entire house heave and shudder. So much space. The room had inflated to absurd proportions, its hollowness terrifying. And that was it. She was gone.

Waylan cried for a while, soft and dry—a noise like a hung drawer. He felt like crying was the most reasonable thing to do. But before he could really get his cheeks nice and wet, he



caught himself. This was pathetic, like The Reeve Drawer. Pure, distilled self-pity. Enough already. He had responsibilities to fulfill. Didn't he?

Waylan dried his hardly-wet eyes and began summoning up all the indignance he could muster. He cursed and sneered. He ground his teeth. His hands grew restless, and he had the feeling that whatever it was they wanted to grasp was waiting inside the art room.

Standing barefoot, he plumbed the depths of drawers and boxes packed with broken junk. Gutted clocks, loose gears and wires, appliance housings, a miscellany of spray paint cans, electric lamps, brass plates, and the occasional length of driftwood. Two of the Jenkinses' hats hung from one of the shelf posts like great leather mushrooms, the third one still puddled on the floor of the bedroom, where Sam had thrown it the previous night, frisbee-style, in the throes of what he'd hoped was passion. Waylan selected a knot of driftwood and the faceplate of a clock. He stared into his hands, alternating between each object, but minutes later he still couldn't find a way for the items to connect, and really, he didn't care. He'd rather go to the boardwalk and find Bondy, who probably knew where Sam had gone.

Waylan let the senseless objects fall back among the general clutter. It was stupid, trying to do artwork at a time like this. He took a seat on the dusty floor and then settled onto his back, the cool concrete sponging heat from his neck and shoulders. His eyes roamed over the dirty floor and settled on the far wall, where a piece of wire shelving sat laden with junk, most of it familiar. But there was something curious on one of the higher shelves—flat, with canvas covering its top, and from his low vantage, Waylan could see light reflected from its underside, which gleamed like a dinner platter. He needed to see under the canvas.

Waylan came to his feet and approached the shelves with cautious steps. He knew something of great significance waited under the thin fabric, and whatever it was looked pretty

heavy. What he could make out of the shape underneath was as cryptic as it was enticing. Round, more or less, with lines pressing through the canvas in spots so that its shape suggested the coiled heating element of a giant's stove.

He peeled back the canvas with trembling fingers and let it parachute over his feet. A tangle of copper wire and glass stones coiled around a broad round mirror. Sam had told him about this piece—her latest project. He struggled to take it all in. He forced himself to slow down, to start at the perimeter and work his way inward. So he placed a finger on the outermost end of heavy copper wire and followed it, tracing the wire spirals, the smooth glass stones fitted in brass sockets at odd intervals. Waylan chuckled, felt himself tilting into the vortex as his finger followed the coiled metal and glass. The spirals wound tighter and faster, and soon his finger ran out of wire and there was only the cold pool of glass left at the center. There was some frumpy guy—that was him, Waylan—staring back through the glass, haggard eyes struggling in the imperfect light. It'd been a while since he'd paid any attention to his own reflection. In his own eyes, he found only a crackle of that blue fire that lit Reeve's. Mostly there was just pain. How to make this guy in the glass a little more chipper? Maybe there was something on the art rack to remedy that.

Waylan hoisted the mirror up by a wire edge and let it hang near his hip while he rooted through the shelves with his free hand. When he couldn't find what he needed, he began clearing entire shelves of their contents with a swipe of his hand. Loose junk clattered and smashed against the floor, but even after he'd emptied each shelf, he hadn't found what he needed.

Waylan placed the mirror back on the shelf and covered it with the fabric. As he did so, something brassy flashed and fluttered to his feet. When Waylan held it up to the light he knew instantly what it was and what it was for. Gold leaf. Sam was going to use it to accent the mirror,

but it didn't look like she'd be doing that anytime soon. He gathered the gold foil. He sorted through the hats for the best fit and regarded himself in the mirror. No, that wouldn't do. Now he was a cow-eyed buffoon. Wasn't the hat but the T-shirt that really betrayed him, made him into an anachronism. He hung the hat back on its hook. He peeled off his shirt, his pants, folding each article before stacking it on the floor. Now naked, he recrowned his head and smiled into the glass. That was better. He didn't look as anachronistic, but maybe still a little too polished, a little too clean. He left carrying a sheet of gold foil the size of a postcard.

He stepped into the bathroom and flicked the light switch. Three naked bulbs fed light into a mirror on the medicine cabinet. The face that stared back at him under the brim of the hat heralded a better version of Waylan. He knew what came next. He folded the gold leaf in half and tore away a strip the size of a disposable lighter. Using the mirror for reference, he set about bonding the gold leaf to his front teeth. When the gold was more or less in place he removed his toothbrush from its caddy and used the butt end to tamp down the foil more precisely, filling the gaps, edging the contours until the gold made a perfect seal. Wouldn't last as long as the Jenkinses' gold teeth, but there was lots of foil, which he could reapply as often as he needed. The gold foil felt smooth against his tongue, and though the thin metal felt cool inside his mouth, it had no flavor. When he smiled into the mirror his front teeth came ablaze with yellow light. He looked a lot better that way. He could've passed for one of the Jenkinses.

## CHAPTER 32

In addition to Abram Jenkins's Stetson, he outfitted himself with a raw leather vest and straight-legged denim jeans and intaglioed boots. The ruined guitar rode on his back in a kind of sling fashioned from hemp rope. He carried plenty of gold foil on hand for covering his front teeth.

He tracked the bison along the highway, where they moved south in sub-herds of a dozen or more. Up close, they reminded him of great hay bales outfitted with barbarous horns. Males sparred along the road shoulder. Others loitered among the pines, heads bowed to the grass.

Waylan shouted commands to the traffic as it grated past, slow and tedious. His duty, insofar as he understood it, was to make sure no one troubled the beloved wildlife.

Cars passed like twine-linked toys, brake lights flaring in the summertime traffic, people riding to and from the beach. Sometimes the gridlocked drivers had so little to do that they stared at Waylan, who greeted them with a smile, self-appointed reclamer of the Old West, pioneering spirit made incarnate.

"Yonder comes the ugliest stagecoach in the pageant," Waylan shouted at a garbage truck. He bared his teeth at the driver, who sneered through his open window and blared the horn and called him a pinko.

In his right hand, Waylan hefted a sea-scavenged rifle which lacked both trigger guard and trigger. He was going to fix it when he got the chance, just in case the coyotes got cocky and tried to nip him. In his left hand, Waylan carried a mason jar half full of potent drink, which he'd traded off of one of the other vagrants for a Crockett-style raccoon cap he'd found by the rail yard. He cradled the hooch in his palm between sips like it was top-shelf brandy.

He liked to throw his arms wide to demonstrate the size and range of the bison. Sometimes he even held the rifle up in victory and try to incite some of the drivers to honk, which they got a kick out of, especially if they were gridlocked. But usually when he doffed his hat they glanced at his toothless weapon and his pioneering get-up and turned away. Where was the enthusiasm? The frontier was making a comeback, for Christ's sake. What more did they want?

At night, he pitched campfires by the roadside and crooned madly over the raucous notes of his detuned guitar, veering tales of courage and virtue and magnanimity in the Old West. At times, he was so overcome with the sentimentality of his own impromptu verses that he collapsed and wept and then resumed the tune minutes later, precisely where he'd stopped. Even so, it wasn't completely fulfilling. Yes, he'd restored the Jenkinses to their rightful resting place—a heroic deed, as the worm reminded him—but now their absence struck him more profoundly than ever. It was lonely work pioneering the semi-desert by himself, and didn't he deserve proper companions? Didn't the Jenkinses still have the right to enjoy the world they'd helped create? They were wasted in the ground when they ought to roam among the upright.

So after midnight one evening he busied himself by re-excavating the brothers, who came up from their crypts stiff as idols and carrying the earth with them. In order to avoid the suspicion of authority figures or whomever might care, he allowed himself to exhume just one brother per night. Nor would he permit himself to taxi their bodies home without a proper shroud to cover the gurney.

He transformed the art room into a makeshift saloon. A pair of oscillating fans thrummed among the set's less obvious anachronisms. When Waylan had finally arranged all three of the Jenkinses at the table, he thought their appearance much improved, their faces and outfits

weathered now, and carrying earthy patinas. No prop rattlesnakes, no bogus tumbleweeds. Each brother sat with a hand of cards, the sturdy table before them littered with gaming tokens, whiskey bottles, a humidior. Waylan spent hours sitting among them. The artifacts breathed new life into them. Waylan told bawdy jokes with a cigar clenched between his golden teeth while the brothers held their idiot smiles, their unplayed hands, their unlit cigars. Waylan would wake the Jenkinses. He'd coax them back to life.

## CHAPTER 33

He left the broken rifle leaning against an ornamental dogwood in the zoo's parking lot and poured off what was left of the hooch into a hipflask. The girls at the ticket booth paid little attention to his pioneering garb, his gaucho vest, his hat and gaudy boots. They'd probably seen stranger folk than pioneering types during costume week, when the zoo became overrun with astronauts, the undead, comic book heroes, even pirates. He paid his entry from his huge coil of bills and pushed through the turnstiles. The park's enclosures were arranged in no obvious order. His nose wrinkled at the general barnyard reek, and from the park's interior there came piercing calls. He stumbled forward, to locate the callers.

He paused at a cage populated with capuchin monkeys. From his vest, he took out a pair of hand-held wire cutters, which he held ineffectually against the thin chicken wire cage. He didn't understand. Was the idea to insulate the lesser primates from those of the higher order, or was it vice-versa?

He was charmed by the monkeys' animated faces, their quick little eyes, jowls white and cropped with black. They were shrunken rockabilly troubadours, complete with sideburns and widow's peak. He smiled his golden smile over the tiny congregation and they screeched in delight, bared their teeth, raced to and fro over a series of dead limbs. He knew he had much to tell them, but his plan still lacked focus, the details undefined.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried to the monkeys, startling even himself. "We assemble here today against confinement." He studied the frenetic simians as they pressed about to see him. "I mean these bars. I wonder, have any of you considered a career in construction?" People were staring at him. No matter. Too late to stop now. "Now folks, when I say construction I'm speaking about something meaningful." He took a knee to better accommodate the eye level of

his tiny listeners, to whom he divulged his ambitions: namely, that the city's wildlife—zoo animals included—would all roam free, led by Balthazar and Waylan and the Jenkins brothers, and secondly, that they'd all help him construct a monument fit to grace the wasteland. He could give no specifics other than to say it would be something true and elegant and everlasting.

The zoo patrons found Waylan to be an instant sensation, and though he appreciated their enthusiasm, he wasn't sure they really understood the cause. He smiled as hard as he could, but that only made them laugh more. Waylan still hadn't clipped the first wire on the monkey cage when the handcuffs ratcheted closed, the metal cool against his wrists.

The Pumpkin and the Eel loaded him into the backseat of their police cruiser, which was fine except that they took away his hooch. Why? He breathed through his nose, taking in the upholstery's complex bouquet of sweat and shame. Quite a funk, even by his lax new hygiene standards. He braced himself against the seat and gave an uncertain chuckle as the car accelerated. He'd grown unaccustomed to the hastiness of automobiles.

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He was ordered to sleep himself sober. An unbroken line of green paint—humiliation was built into the very architecture of the place—led him to a cell with concrete walls painted like rainy skies. Waylan carried no incriminating instruments on his person at the time of arrest, save the flask and the volatile drink it held, so he wasn't considered much of a danger to himself or anyone else. He complied peaceably, spent the night with his face pressed to the cool cement floor, the lingering pine scent of disinfectant reminding him of all the stripped forests he'd never get to hike. The hooch made a hot pool in his belly, causing him strange dreams of giants and monkeys at sea.



He was released the next morning, under advisement that he seek psychiatric counseling.

Waylan studied the warden and his clean-shaven face.

“So you’re keen on animals?” the warden said.

“What if I am?”

“I heard from the zoo’s board of directors. They need volunteers. Why not sober up and put yourself to good use?”

Waylan reclaimed his hat and his now-empty flask. Then he swaggered through the open gates and out into the hard morning light.

## CHAPTER 34

Waylan had always thought the medication was to blame for his latency, but his sense of lagging just behind the present moment became more pointed than ever, the course of each new day determined in advance while he slept. His life—maybe all lives?—a worm-led waltz over the edge of a steep cliff bottomed with sharp alkaline rocks that'd sting like hell where they cut you, should you be unfortunate enough to survive the fall.

Straddling the bicycle with his feet planted, he glanced over the Lafitte's lot and tugged at the brim of his hat. How many shifts had he missed? He was pretty sure it was early August now, if not later. Hard to keep track these days, but he was pretty sure he'd run out of money if he didn't go back to work. He shifted his weight from one boot to another, feeling a lot like a con man mentally rehearsing his opening gambit. He used his shirtsleeve to sop up the sweat where it beaded on his nose.

A pretty big queue of hungry patrons this Saturday afternoon. They eyed him with restrained hostility, ever suspicious of being gulled by a new interloper. The air stank of seared squid. Waylan was afraid he might be way too sober to step through the glass doors and into the bridled chaos inside the lobby. He tried to steady himself, but ended up bobbling across the lot, a puppet with spring-loaded joints, the limestone gravel chafing and rolling under his heels. He'd have to act like the Old Waylan again, just for a short time. For all his distrust of outsiders, Waylan knew he needed them, their approval or disapproval. It was possible that he'd even grown a little vain. True, he needed income, but he also wanted to know was how those fried calamari burgers were selling.

He felt alienated inside the restaurant, no matter how he forced himself to walk as Old Waylan would walk, gesture as Old Waylan might gesture. It was so crowded, and there was

such a consumptive charge in the air. Children hung from the fiberglass pirate ship, shrieking delightedly. The whole place buzzed with all the wrong energy. Dangerous vibrations that he could actually *see*—a kind of silver-spun radiation. If he wasn't careful, he'd start vibrating like them, start radiating those hungry chrome needles. *Be quick. Be so quick.*

Hands pocketed, he approached the front counter. He meant to stop there and ask to see Prescott, but sensed his own failing confidence and overcorrected, sent himself lurching past the counter, past a clerk he didn't recognize.

"I know the owner," he said. He looked through the glass-ported kitchen door, but it was pretty steamy in there, and he couldn't see Prescott. He flung the door open and stepped into a heavy bank of steam and the all-too-familiar stink of hot squid.

Owen watched him from the fry station, thick squid filets arranged before him like slabs of molten glass set out to cool.

"Just here to see Prescott," Waylan said.

Owen gave him a nearly imperceptible wave. Waylan posted his hands on his hips and give a stern nod, like he was in control here, just taking a survey of the kitchen. He tried to look entitled, like he was still Squidmaster. But mere entitlement wasn't going to suffice, so Waylan worked up a gob of spit. Why shouldn't he? Who else was responsible for all this thriving business? He spat onto the tile and instantly regretted it. He tried to scrub it away with the sole of his shoe. Then the cuff of his jeans. He only succeeded in smearing the puddle into a larger crescent pattern. Finally, he cast an indignant glance about the kitchen to see who noticed. No one looked back.

Prescott's office was packed with large boxes, some with their flaps separated, revealing complicated kitchen instruments that Waylan didn't recognize. Prescott himself sat dressed in a

sort of harlequin's pastiche of piratewear. Gaudy metallic beads circled his neck. He wore the same cartoonish tricorne, the seams chalked with old sweat. Prescott squinted at the screen of a computer as if what news it offered was a great disappointment. When he noticed Waylan standing in the doorway, he glanced back to the computer screen. A fiberglass chair waited in front of Prescott's desk, but he didn't motion for Waylan to sit.

"Allowed we'd seen the last of you," Prescott finally said. He took an eyeful of Waylan's pioneering get-up and took a deep breath.

Waylan cleared his throat. "Business is looking good."

Prescott's head wagged. "I suppose it's all right, Waylan. That Owen sure has come into his own."

"He learned from the best."

"Listen. I know you must have your reasons for what you've done. Can't be easy going through what you've been through, so I've made certain allowances in the past. But I can't have you telling me false information and disappearing for days on end. I've got to be able to trust a man if I'm to work with him."

"That's only fair."

"I'm sorry as I can be, Waylan." Prescott shook his sweaty head. "We go way back, and I was hoping we'd ride this thing out for years to come, I truly was. Hell, you helped put Lafitte's on the map, and I'll always be grateful for it. But I'm afraid we've got to part ways, old buddy."

"We have?" Waylan swallowed hard.

"The calamari burgers are your idea. I know that. Maybe you don't think I'm the sharpest tool in the chest, but I'll be damned if I'll ever be called a cheat. So we can do this one of two ways: I'm offering to buy the recipe from you at a fair price, or if you can't agree to that, then

I'll just have to agree to stop selling them altogether. I'm as sick as I can be about either outcome. I'm just—" his hands fluttered bird-like over his desk. "Well, I'm just damn disappointed."

"You could give me another chance," Waylan said.

"No he can't," someone called from the hallway. A woman's voice, heavily muffled.

Prescott wagged his stubby finger. "Connie don't think it's such a good idea that we work together anymore, and I'm inclined to agree."

"But what about the fried squid? That was my idea. A gift to Lafitte's." Waylan shook his head. "Owen," he pleaded, cupping his hands to show that mere words couldn't convey Owen's culpability. "He was supposed to tell you."

"He did tell me. Said you deep fried a couple fillets on a whim and then turned on your heels and walked out like you were lord of all things seafood."

"But the idea, it could make us all stinking rich."

Prescott levered off his tricorne and set it before him on the keyboard. "You may be right, but I'm about as stinking as I care to be for now. Besides, folks want everything grilled these days."

Waylan could only stand there, feeling punch-drunk.

"Is Sam with you?" Prescott said. He kept watching the door, like he was trying to will her into the office.

"Gone," Waylan said, eyes roving cautiously about the office, the garish cartoons on the walls made alien, unfamiliar. The faded characters withdrew their bigoted jokes and isolated Waylan from the room. They leered at him from the walls and giggled like imps, redirected their

cajolery. Prescott probably wouldn't notice. Waylan had accepted by now that the world that he confronted shared few similarities with the world the greater many endorsed.

"But haven't you forgotten something?" Waylan finally said.

"I don't know. Have I?"

Waylan arched his eyebrows. He smiled nice and big so those gilded teeth would really shine. "You'll need a boat."

"We've been doing just fine without your boat for weeks now," said Prescott. "And I'm being damn generous when I say it's your boat, am I not?" Prescott clasped his hands and leaned forward like he'd tell a secret. "Did you dress up like that because you thought I might feel sorry for you?"

"Dress up like what?"

"Because you don't look much like a pirate. Pardon my saying so, but you look a fool. Why not scrape that mess off your teeth and try to sell some of that artwork? You probably enjoy that more than you did working here anyway."

Waylan felt himself flush with rage, his skin going itchy, sweat marbles working out from under his hairline, the drops so fat he felt his pores straining to birth them. It was a contest now. He'd have to out-sweat Prescott in order to advance. So be it. His blood was liquid cinnamon and its vessels were superheated. In fact, he could turn his blood into red steam if he wanted to. If he opened his mouth, he could vent that steam, maybe distract Prescott, throw off his concentration.

Waylan popped his mouth open, but none of that beautiful red steam came out. Christ, now he'd have to say something.

“I enjoyed the construction, Nels. Digging into the earth. Building things. I guess you’d rather play goddamn pirates.”

A perplexed smile broke out on Prescott’s sweaty face. “You’d have preferred playing goddamn cowboys?”

Waylan stopped smiling. Prescott was giving off that awful chrome radiation he’d seen in the lobby. Waylan scooted back a little, so the rays wouldn’t touch him.

“You really are a stupid man,” he said to Prescott. “Just some shit-brained mouth-breather who got lucky. I’ve always thought so. You should hear what Owen says about you.”

Prescott nodded and cleared the sweat from his lip with arrogance, like he was titleholder to so many sweating contests against so many of the greats that he wouldn’t even deign to compete with a guy like Waylan.

“I think you’d better leave,” he told Waylan.

Waylan stood and spun out the door. The kitchen appeared even more vast and uncharitable now through the steam and the clatter. He’d made only a few steps when he felt an arm drape over his shoulder and enclose his neck like a pillory. Connie spun him around and checked him over like he was flawed stock set out for purchase and she the skeptical buyer.

“Who’d you pay to glue that shit to your teeth? You look like a country music star.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Those Jenkinses.”

“What about them?”

She blinked his question away. “We found another empty grave down by the creek, but alas, no Jenkinses. Seems they’ve vacated their stage, buried and then unburied themselves, and then disappeared out in the desert.”

“That so?”

“Pioneering spirit must have repossessed their filthy old hearts. Unless of course it was that some other non-Jenkins party gave them a boost out the window. Sounds like a stretch, I realize.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Well, I was wondering what a fella like you might have to say about those Jenkinses, you having more intimate knowledge than most. And you sporting that new million dollar smile and that authentic Stetson and all.”

Waylan was thinking he’d like to write a song about her. In the song, a bunch of brothers would come together to do great deeds and cavort and cause mischief, and she’d be the corrupt sheriff who had them all hanged for disturbing the peace.

“Well?” Connie said.

“They were nothing but dead bones.” He was trying to sound nice and wistful, really piss her off. “But you made them so lifelike, so true. Maybe even they fell under the spell of it. Who’s to say they might not make one last expedition?”

“Why you pseudo-philosophical shit.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you really as crazy as you sound or do you pretend at it?”

“I’m not,” he said, tapping the bony crest of his skull. “But the worm who lives in here?” Waylan wagged his head in mock hopelessness.

“Because someone could make a small fortune off those Jenkinses if they knew the right buyers. Your worm have any opinion on that subject?”

“No opinion or interest.”



“I’ve notified every museum and collector you can think of. They’ll call the police the minute you try to sell.”

“My advice is check all the local tit-houses and watering holes and leave me the hell alone.”

## CHAPTER 35

Waylan could hear his brothers before he even entered the house, their cavorting audible, though swallowed up by the asthmatic notes of a harmonica. Waylan carried a sheen of sweat from the long ride home. He felt a mild wave of nausea as he swung the door of the art room open and stepped into a cloud of caustic fumes. The air carried a thick haze of cigar smoke, but that wasn't where the fumes were coming from.

The floor of the art room was littered with depleted cans of spray paint the Jenkinses had used to accent the walls with obsolete profanity, *goldarned* appearing most frequently. Across the door someone had written out, *Not worth a fart in a whirlwind*. That'd be Giles, most deviant of the three. His fingers were stained with a full spectrum of paint colors. Something unsavory about him—maybe the broad and curving mustache?

Giles was sitting next to Abram, both of them balanced on their haunches near the back of the room. Abram clenched a chrome harmonica in his mouth so that it wheezed along to his breathing. The Jenkinses' most enthusiastic musician. Abram and Giles had uncovered an old set of *National Geographics* and were staring at the color photographs, their tacky fingers adhering to the pages. They must have found some naked women in there. Or, he hoped they were women. Hadn't the actual pioneering types taken wives who were still in their early teens? Waylan had forgotten about that part. Now he watched Giles's moustache as it twitched above his lip like a creature disconnected from the man himself. Might even be some exotic species of mind-worm that roosted externally.

Waylan assumed his customary place at the circular table. Leroy, eldest brother—and so, commander *de facto* of their filthy coterie—eyed Waylan craftily over the tabletop. In one hand he gripped an enormous knife. In the other, he held a finely-detailed phallus whittled from a

piece of Waylan's driftwood. He rolled the wooden member over the table and watched it settle with the bulbous tip directed at Waylan. Instantly, Leroy was seized by a fit of laughter, which detained him only briefly before he upended a tall whiskey bottle and drank, little trails of honey-colored liquor running from the corners of his mouth and coursing down his neck, over the tiny chips of wood that clung there. Leroy's face wore the expression of a half-bored predator. Christ, they were all so young. They might be teenagers. True, he still preferred his reconstructed saloon to the Prescott's kitchen and its squid reek, but where was that noble Western spirit? Where in the hearts of these men was that profound appreciation for the natural world and the simple decency of frontier life?

"Best not go out tonight," Waylan said. "I know that's not what you all want to hear, but that museum lady, well, she's wise to us."

Leroy glared at him over the table and then fired a slug of spit right onto the concrete floor.

"Hell, it'll be fine," Waylan said. "We'll play some poker and cut up and have a damn fine time of it. What say, Giles?"

Without looking up from the magazine, Giles slapped the harmonica from Abram's mouth. "I say we been cooped up long enough."

"Anyway I don't care for poker," Abram said. "I mean to find me a loose faro table and a nice plump whore to ride my lap while I play."

Giles nodded, still reading. "Tonight we go whoring. Down there by the ocean."

Waylan licked his lips. "But that's the thing. You can't just go out whoring. It's not that kind of town."

“Reckon we got specie enough to make it just such a town,” Abram said, holding up a handful of souvenir coins from Lafitte’s.

“That museum lady,” Waylan said, turning to Leroy. “See, we’ve got to lay low for a while, my brothers.”

“Say the word brother one more time,” Leroy said, “and I’ll carve it into your goddamn forehead.” He was using the point of his knife to clean his fingernails. “We’re not your brothers and we’re not yours to corral like a gang of shoats. If Giles says we’re whoring tonight then you’d best not impede us.”

“Well don’t carve on him just yet, Leroy,” Giles said. “Less you feel inclined to ride one of those mechanical steamcoaches.”

“I believe not,” Leroy said. “Believe we’ll make do with Waylan’s boneshaker. Won’t we, Waylan?”

“What’re those?” Waylan motioned to Giles, who sat beaming, with a large paper envelope in his lap. One by one, he was unloading what looked like dirty cords with pointed tops.

“Oh, nothing at all,” Abram said, showing off his shopworn teeth. “Pay no attention to Giles here.”

Leroy had been watching, and he responded with a full-bellied laugh. “I do believe there’s a fungus among us,” he called.

“Got these little sweeties off a pretty little squaw,” Giles said. “Believe she was Karankawa. Fucked her so nice she had to thank me twice.”

Waylan forced a laugh. The precise connotations of the word *squaw* were unknown to him, but he knew they weren't good. Surely the brothers would be better-behaved in public. Wouldn't they?

"He's a lying sack of bug shit," Leroy said, thumb angled toward Giles. "He gets to feeling chesty on that cheap whiskey."

Abram only grinned harder. "Fucked her so sweet there was sugar on the sheets."

Waylan tried to smile, but it wasn't easy.

"Fucked her so poor she pushed you out the door," Leroy sang.

"These days old Giles has got to pay those whores double," Abram said, staring at Giles as he wiped his chin. "Likes some real sorry arrangements, does Giles. Once caught him in rut with this old sow, and both of them were wearing geisha masks. Giles had her all slathered up with honey, had himself dusted with powdered sugar, and at it they went."

Giles shot Waylan an expansive smile, his deviant moustache stretching and flexing wing-like over his thin lips. "God almighty," he said. "What an evening this'll be." He took a clear plastic bear from his vest and held it up to the light. Waylan had seen it before, in the kitchen. Sam's bottle of clover honey.

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They drank and they jostled under the muslin cover as Waylan pedaled their wretched convoy south, the stale and sickly taste of Giles's mushrooms lingering on his tongue. He wore shorts and a T-shirt at Leroy's insistence that Waylan dress like a man of his own era. Some nerve Leroy had, dictating the wardrobe of the guy who'd rescued him from history.

Bison and longhorn swept in from the treeline and meandered near the highway. They were all veering and erratic, convulsing like bad animatronics. Waylan drew his convoy to a halt. Hot sparks issued from the mouth of a misfiring bison.

“In the fuck are you stopping for?” Leroy said, peeking out from under the tarp.

“It’s all changing,” Waylan said. “The bison. They’ve gone mechanical.”

“Poor fool thinks he sees bison,” Leroy told his brothers.

When the Jenkins brothers scented the salt air, they took to whooping and making lewd jokes. Against Waylan’s objections, they cast off the muslin and leered out madly, calling on the men to brawl with them and calling on the women to adore them. The brothers hobbled free of the gurney to upbraid a hapless trio of pedestrians long before they reached the boardwalk’s parking lot. Waylan finally arrived at the lot feeling watched. No one else would return his golden smile. Sleek vehicles rode up alongside him, catching him in their headlights and firing their horns. The droves of wildlife had withdrawn. He didn’t feel the worm moving around in his head, and he wondered if maybe tonight his lodger chose to occupy the skull of another. A Jenkins brother, perhaps, and in which of their skulls would it choose to roost?

He left the bicycle curbside and made his way over the boards with pocketed hands and little purpose at all. Sidestepping small gangs of lusty teenagers and boardwalk refuse, a fallen paper cone stuffed with hot pink cotton candy, the middle trodden flat, pink fibers liquefying in the humidity. In the absence of his brothers, Waylan remembered the modern world’s marvels. The pedestrians with their polished faces, their fine-stitched garments. The graceful Ferris wheel blazing with light, enormous psychedelic timepiece. The rollercoaster howling along its helical track, its square cars fitted with pointillé lights. To Waylan, the coaster resembled a great

flaming dragon curling through space and time. He could see down to the coast, the water ghostly and luminous.

The boards bowed considerably underfoot as he stepped, and when his foot came off they hummed marimba notes. He played a walking melody. Between his feet, the gaps that separated each plank were expanding, or were the planks themselves narrowing? They'd taper down to tongue depressors and Waylan would fall into space, drop out of existence. Already, he could see clustered pins of light giving shape to fog patches down there, the distant nebulae of compressed galaxies, the overwhelming depth of it all threatening to swallow him. He hurried along, arms held out like outriggers to save him from slipping between resonant boards.

Farther along, he could make out the garish yellow and purple walls of the jester's booth, the jester himself caged inside, an exotic tomato-fed beast. Waylan didn't dare venture within earshot.

He reached the sand as if by magnetism and dropped to his knees when he came within a few yards of the water. He could make out the lights of Caribbean towns many hundred miles distant, could hear glasses clinking, revelers laughing. The architecture of the heavens spilled out on the water in endless reiteration, over which dark clouds lost their buoyancy, scraping against the waves. With a brush of his hand, Waylan could displace those clouds, which were breathing.

He was surrounded by beached squid, which flapped their little fins, bodies shifting color, strobing from dark to pale, dark to pale. For a long time he watched them, hoping he might decode whatever it was they were saying, but his concentration wandered. He mumbled aloud that they, too were beautiful creatures, uncertain whether the voice he heard emanated from within or without. Harder to tell lately. On the outskirts of town, hard red lights marked out the dark spires of refineries. These red lights did not wink, did not shift.

Waylan turned back to the water. A dirty yellow storybook moon gained altitude somewhere over Cuba. Celluloid cloud patches took on light as they crossed beneath it. He drew up his knees and made a ring of his arms.

Where would Sam be on a night like this? Bondy's, probably. Odd that he didn't feel like crying. Did that mean he was past the grieving process or that he was still in denial? He'd been told that people experienced grief in stages, but he couldn't remember which stages were healthy and which weren't. He didn't really want to see Sam, he knew that much. Only surprise was that she'd stuck around as long as she had. He still loved her, but even if he did see her, he didn't know what either of them would have to say at this point. Already, it felt kind of surreal that they'd ever shared a bed together. So what stage was that—avoidance? Wasn't that the final stage?

Waylan rested his head on his arms and let his eyes go half-closed. He could still make out the rough shape of his own arms and legs, a kind of after-image that warped to a grainy texture the color of the desert, like Waylan was some kind of person-shaped sand castle. Goddamn mushrooms. From this new perspective, all was smeared with motion. Particulate matter pulled free of his earthy body in heavy skeins, a kind of destructive beauty at work. A howling wind slowly reducing him, Waylan coming unlayered like something pressed together from ashes. He wanted to hear that wind, to know what it sounded like as it wore his body down. His heart was working way too fast now, but he couldn't stop watching. For all the dusty matter that this soundless gale tore free, his body was undiminished. He was capable of withstanding the wind, possibly for years. It was beautiful. He turned up the palm of an open hand, saw plumes of sand and smoke uncoil from each of his fingers.

#



When Waylan woke, the sun was already scowling over the water. The daylight sobered him. What new horrors had the Jenkins brothers wreaked on the town while he slept? More horrible was the realization that he was lying among a number of other blood-warm sleepers, loose arms and legs pinning him down under a thin bed sheet. He remembered nothing past observing his disintegrating body. He'd been alone when he fell asleep.

A teenage girl rolled over to face him and blinked her sleepy eyes. Waylan rolled away from her, hoping against all hope that he wouldn't find Giles sleeping beneath her. Others came awake under the sheet as Waylan struggled free, and a general groaning ensued until he disengaged himself from the warm and squirming mound. He walked over a shinbone, whose owner cursed him abundantly.

"You're older than I thought," the girl mumbled. "Glad you didn't try to fuck me." She was taking stock of him in the gathering light, her body radiating spokes of chrome. Waylan backed away.

"He doesn't look that old," someone said, blinking her incredulous eyes. "Hey, what's that on your teeth?" she said to Waylan.

"What'd you do with my things?" Waylan said, patting himself down for his wallet.

"Relax, man," one of the boys said, his voice raw with sleep. "You were shivering. We were just trying to keep you warm."

"I never asked to be warm," he said, turning and stepping closer to the slow-rolling waves.

"Told you he was creepy," someone muttered.

"Just get back in here with us," the nearest girl said. "Before you wake everybody up."

"I got business needs my attention," Waylan said.

“You can piss in the sand, for Christ’s sake,” someone growled. “Then get back under the sheet so we can all sleep.”

They were all nestled together like the subject of a sentimental greeting card. What he saw was more inviting than he cared to admit. In another world, he’d climb back among them and sleep forever, the surf murmuring into his ear, the warmth of them all pressed close against him. But he needed to find the Jenkinses, and he suspected that by now they’d be bored with the beach. Probably he’d find them near the Lafitte’s lot, where they’d spent so many years buried.

The girl who’d first spoken to Waylan smiled and gave a drowsy laugh and turned over. She disappeared under a white sheet impaled with long needles of silver light.

#

He smelled the honeyed burn of the Jenkins brothers’ cigars before he spotted them. They were camped near the creek under the cover of scrub oaks on the east side, opposite Lafitte’s, their perimeter marked with empty whiskey bottles and a few balled-up Lafitte’s wrappers. A neglected heap of graying embers smoldered at their feet, the coals encircled by a loose array of river stones. All three of the Jenkinses were squatting together, hatless in the scant shade. They sulked over a loose pile of magazines and newspapers and a few hardcover books. Beyond their campsite ran the rows of cotton and the corn stalks all greenly lit.

Waylan eyed them. “You’re not drunk,” he said.

“They ran us out of the saloon,” Abram said. “Sun had yet to rise, but they said they were closed just the same. Had the constable ready to cuff us around if we started trouble.”

“Couldn’t find any whores,” Leroy said. “Little man at the brothel said the only whores he ran came in these here picture books.” He held up the pornographic magazines with constrained awe. “Bought us a newspaper, too.”

“How long’ve you known we were dead?” Abram said. He held up a leaf of newsprint bearing a photograph of their excavated skeletons.

“I don’t know,” Waylan said. “Are you dead?”

Abram shook his filthy head. “This here circulation claims we’ve been dead better than two hundred years. I just can’t feature it.”

Giles was scanning a book with an astronaut on the cover. “And this here claims some fella from Ohio trod the moon with a glass bowl screwed to his head.” His mustache quivered over his lip. “Don’t look like much of anything up there. Just a bunch of rock.”

“And it says there’s no cities or watercourses on planet Mars,” Abram said. “Says it’s just like the desert, only you can’t breathe.”

Waylan thought he’d seen that book before. “Is that mine?” he said.

Giles spat. “Didn’t see your goddamn name on it.”

Abram sat up to have Waylan’s attention. “Well that’s got to be disproved by now, right Waylan? I mean, it can’t be true. Surely there’s other worlds bepopulated with all sorts of queer creatures. Surely there’s more places to settle.”

Waylan consulted the sky doubtfully, and when he could give no answer each of the Jenkins brothers wilted.

“Told y’all,” Leroy said.

“So that’s the universe we’ve agreed to occupy,” Abram said.

“Tell me it’s boundless,” Giles said. “At least tell me there’s no borders to it, no way to take its measure.”

“I don’t know,” Waylan said. “I’m not sure anyone knows to a certainty.”

“Did they ever find our lord and savior up there among the stars?” Giles said.

“No,” Waylan said, “I guess they never did.”

“Well who do they think it was authored the whole of creation?” Giles said.

“No one,” Waylan said. “The universe may have just sprung up like a soap bubble.

Eventually it’ll sort of fizzle out and a new one will pop up.”

“Shit,” Leroy said. “What happens in the new bubble? Do we get to live all over again or what?”

“Sort of,” Waylan said. “Only each bubble might carry a variation.”

“A what?” Leroy said.

“A change. There might be a world where the color green is actually blue. Or there might be a world where Lincoln was never assassinated.”

“To hell with such a world as that,” Leroy said.

“There might be a world where you all are bankers instead of outlaws,” Waylan said.

“Waylan’s having a laugh at us,” Leroy said, sliding his huge knife from its scabbard.

“I’m not,” Waylan said.

“We’re not the keenest but by God we’re not the thickest,” Leroy said, pointing the knife like a lecture instrument. “I don’t put stock in it myself. There’s not but one world, and that’s the one beneath my boots. This world and no other world.”

Leroy sank the blade of the knife into the soil and scraped a load of it into his free hand. He let it sift slowly between his fingers, hardly enough to fill a teaspoon.

“Believe I’ve heard enough of it my own self,” Giles said.

“Naught but a soap bubble,” Abram said, him more astonished than the rest. “Just drown me in the crick now and be done with it.”

“Dry your weeping eyes,” Leroy said. “We’re not constrained by any fancy soap mote.”

“Have you seen it with your own eyes?” Abram said to Waylan. “Did you reconnoiter the heavens wearing one of those glass jars?”

“Of course not.”

“Well then how came you to learn such wild notions?” Abram said.

“Saw it on television. Read about it some.”

“Well I strictly refuse it,” Leroy said. “I reject it. You yourself said you’ve not been out there to verify it.”

“If the world really does reload itself for another round,” Giles said, “well I’ll do things different. I’ll save that little girl from the hotel fire next go round, instead of—” Giles glanced wildly from face to face, and Waylan was pretty sure he didn’t want to hear the rest.

“Doesn’t work that way,” Abram said, interrupting. “A man wouldn’t know his fate before it befell him, would he Waylan?”

“He might know enough to dread his fate,” Waylan said, “however vague the specifics.”

“Sort of like reading tarot cards,” Abram said. “Seems I draw that shit-stinking Fool card every time.”

“Fool card is right,” Leroy said. “Waylan’s got a deck full of them.”

“Well you can’t reprove him to a moral certainty,” Abram said.

Leroy spat onto the coals. “I’d know it if I was living the same life over.”

“Would you?” Abram said, turning to Waylan. “Maybe it’d feel just like it does now. Maybe we’ve all forgotten.”

“Hellfire,” Giles said. “We might’ve already lived through a baker’s dozen of those soap bubbles.”

“That’s physics,” Waylan said.

“Hellfire,” Giles said, louder this time. “Waylan. What if we’re the slight variation?”

“What?” Waylan felt the blood evacuating his cheeks.

“Right,” Giles said. “What if we was meant to be honest-to-God bankers like you said and this here world is the flawed world?”

Leroy spat. Abram rested his head on crossed arms.

“Anyway, it’s only a theory,” Waylan said.

Too late. Giles was already sobbing into his hands. The other two brothers bawled in sympathy, and Waylan could only sit there among them, staring off into the semi-desert, nothing to see but the distant creek and far behind it, the oil derricks genuflecting silently to the ground.

When it grew sufficiently dark, he pedaled the Jenkinses home, where they balked and grew salty. They wouldn’t reenter their makeshift saloon. Instead, they drew their knives and demanded that Waylan lend them shovels and pedal them back to their old lot near Lafitte’s.

There at the lot, the brothers took turns digging until they’d excavated three shallow graves set side by side. It was sweaty work, flies crawling about the backs of their necks, primitive insects coming unnnested in the soil. The brothers took shifts, refusing Waylan’s offers to help. Two of them would dig while the third cooled off by the creek. When they finished digging, they stood around and took a final look at what’d become of the world in their long absence.

“Smaller than I remember,” Leroy said, motioning to the sky.

“Used to be more animals, too,” Giles said.

“The animals are coming back,” Waylan said. “See?” He pointed out a loose herd of longhorns moving toward the creek. But again, the animals appeared hobbled. Their steps were

labored, internal gears gnashing, throwing sparks. Proud helical horns now angled toward the ground, their necks too weak to support them.

“They’re not coming back,” Leroy said. “And we don’t belong here.”

“You’re not alone, far as that goes,” Waylan said.

“Oh, why not weep me a deep and rolling river?” Leroy said. “We’re not liable for your miserable disposition. That’s on you.”

“Well, suppose you might bury me there beside you all,” Waylan said. “We may not be brothers by blood, but suppose you could make me sort of an honorary Jenkins.”

The three brothers scoffed and toed the soil.

“Like we was his fucking boon companions,” Giles said, voice going mock-feminine.

“Moonsick fool,” Leroy said. “Go and live your stinking life, Waylan. You’ve not yet earned a grave, never mention a grave among the likes of us.”

The four of them smoked a farewell cigar before they deposited Giles, who lay down in his grave and rolled his shoulders to make a comfortable depression. He signaled to his brothers that he was ready and they nodded and began covering him with soil. Waylan stood near the creek bed as they worked, tears standing in his eyes. Set against the semi-desert, the brothers restored a sense of timelessness to the landscape that Waylan now found unsettling, like he’d arrived on the dawn of some long-forgotten perversion of harvest day, three brothers gone mad on ergotic rye bread and too much moonlight, now set to bury one another.

When only Leroy remained, Waylan stood and walked over to the graves. He could just make out the sound of Giles and Abram coughing and muttering to one another down in the earth, their voices all but stifled. Leroy kneeled down stiffly into place and sat there with his shoulders and head protruding. He and Waylan shared an awkward silence before Leroy finally

beckoned Waylan to pick up the shovel and pack him in. Leroy disappeared a shovelful at a time, his oversized knife secure beneath crossed arms.

Waylan sat at their graves until the sun broke, the brothers cavorting underground all the while. He even thought he heard Leroy give a rousing cheer, and only then did he walk back to the campsite.

When he crossed the creek again, the sunlight was already illuminating small fishes harbored in the lee of slick green rocks. Back at the campsite, Waylan stirred the coals with his boots until they flared a dull orange. He dropped the books and magazines onto the crimson embers and shifted them with a forked stick the Jenkinses had left. The pages smoldered for a long time before they caught, Waylan wringing his hands in the heat. When they'd burned to his satisfaction, he kicked dirt over the fire and poured out what remained in the whiskey bottles, sending up billowing steam shapes. Then he walked back down to the creek carrying the three hats and pitched them into the current.



## CHAPTER 36

Sam perched on the toilet in her mother's bathroom and used her fingernail to pry open the flap of an elongated cardboard box. Her hands were unsteady, and they couldn't find purchase. She grumbled and angled her fingernail deeper into the cardboard, tearing harder, but it wouldn't give. Finally she began wringing the box with both hands until a split developed near the center. She sank her nails in and tore the thing into halves. A plastic wand tumbled out and clattered against the floor. Sam doubled over to pick it up.

This was complete nonsense—an utterly tactless joke. The inside of her mouth still tasted like tomatoes and orange juice, but she knew there were plenty of reasons why people could get sick at the breakfast table. Probably this was just residual anxiety over Waylan. Or maybe she'd just lost her stomach for the triple-decker pancakes her mother liked to cook.

She started peeing, then swished the wand. Averting her eyes from the little window, she set the wand next to the sink. Sam was an insect drying the morning dew from her wings as it readied for morning flight. Patient, not afraid. She'd find the strength enough to face what needed facing.

She'd spotted Waylan just once since the breakup, and with his broken rifle and desperado outfit he might have been an aspiring forty-niner who received news of the gold rush far too late. She hadn't even believed it was him until Bondy verified that she'd seem him in similar garb. Maybe Waylan's demons were more vicious than he'd let on. He'd been medicated as long as she'd known him, and if anything, she'd always worried that Dr. Jable kept him a little too sedate. She'd known about the depression, but the pioneering shtick suggested illness of a higher order. Sounded like he was out there trying to engage with a past that wasn't even there.

Probably he'd outgrow this new obsession, just like his itch for the big cities. Sometimes the best avenue for Waylan was to play out his obsessions until he saw them fray and unravel. He'd been fixated on the roulette wheel, for instance, but as soon as he had it completed it was already time to find a new trinket.

Their child—were they to have one, which they weren't—wouldn't necessarily inherit Waylan's neuroses. But a child reared by Waylan, well, that was another matter. He'd mean well, sure. But could he *be there*, existing as someone's father? Could he tell their child a spooky Halloween story without turning it maudlin, or without scaring himself witless? Was he capable of sitting through clunky-fingered piano recitals and endless episodes of *Scooby Doo*? Was *she*, for that matter?

There was a double-tap at the door. "You okay in there, honey?"

"Just fine," Sam said, sitting up straight. "Think I might take a bath."

The bathroom was cozy, and she could reach over and turn on the taps without even getting up from the toilet. Her mother didn't say anything else, or if she did, Sam didn't hear her over all the surging water. Within minutes, the bathroom filled up with silver steam that dulled mirrors and chrome surfaces. The steam cleared her sinuses and soothed her raw throat, hot water splashing from the faucet to make a kind of music. She'd wait till after her bath to check the silly test. Ridiculous, to get yourself worked up this early on. If nothing else, you had to give yourself one moment, one indulgence to enjoy each day. This was hers.

She undressed and stepped into water. She cut off the taps and gave into the weightless feeling of her body suspended in all that warmth, the room silent now, save for the toll of drops falling from the spigot. She watched them form at the lip of the faucet, swelling, pausing just a moment before plunging. The pause fascinated her, the dramatic rift in time that separated the

release of one drop from the next. Did water have a consciousness? She admired the patience of a water body, transporting itself one drop at a time, forever shaped by gravity's advantage. It wasn't weakness, the way water flowed downhill. More like water had found a way to make a tool of the same physical laws that enslaved it. If only people could behave like water.

Sam would be happy stewing in the warmth for hours, but eventually she'd grow pruny. Eventually the water would cool down, or some unpleasant need would drive her out. Soon enough, her eyes would have to wander toward that vulgar length of plastic beside the sink.

Now the tears came, cutting urgent streams down her cheeks, past the hollows of her neck, disappearing into the greater body of tub water.

## CHAPTER 37

The Old West had turned on him, and for that, he hated the entire semi-desert and the Jenkins brothers that it contained. He began to loathe dust grains individually. In each cactus patch he found a hateable face. Flat ground, flat ground. By day the pitiless sun, and by night the ornate chimneys and spires of refineries, cold stannic cityscapes. Whose cities? Who was it that came together to scheme inside those walls, and who or what did they scheme about?

Only the water relaxed him. He could stare out at the Gulf for hours because the light was always casting some new spell on its surface, revealing more depth, more variations on blue and green. He found the creek tolerable enough in short intervals. Its waters were made of different stuff, staining silver rather than blue in the sunlight.

Waylan spent most of his time sleeping on the couch with Balthazar, the house empty and silent and quickly dilapidating around them. He wasn't being negligent. The problem was that time was playing tricks on him, speeding up, passing at incredible rates, and he couldn't match its pace. Houseplants withered to dry stalks in hours. Balthazar's bowls went empty before he could fill them. Waylan and the hound made a living off of stale bread. Everything else he tried to eat tasted of sauerkraut, and he liked sauerkraut about as much as he liked the desert.

New vegetable and animal life flourished in the refrigerator and in the sink, but even these forms were only half-invested in existence. Great gnat swarms sprung up over the uneaten bowls of fruit in the kitchen, but they gave in to despair, kept dive-bombing to the bottom of Waylan's whiskey jar. If Waylan watched them for too long, the sotted gnats would start singing to him. Happy, kazoo-inflected songs that traced the transition from gnat innocence to gnat love, the unbearable sadness of an insect's abbreviated lifespan. Waylan used the stereo to quash their tinny voices. He rolled the heavy chrome dial through static and used car ads and songs of

heartache and alienation that rang far too true. He finally settled on the static, which sounded a lot like the surf at Gaston Beach—a form of music that never progressed, never had to end. You could rely on static, its constant radiation.

One night he dreamed that the irises of his eyes were twin Ferris wheels, with happy little gnats riding in their seats. If he unfocused his eyes just enough, he could see each gnat rider in horrific detail. They kept accidentally dropping their peanuts and popcorn and cotton candy, and one gnat even got sick over the side of its cart.

There was ringing calliope music, and he understood that the Ferris wheels were just part of a whole gnat amusement park that convened behind his eyes. The calliope music pitched higher, dissolving into finely-tuned brass bells. Then each of the wheel's gnat riders held up a card with a Roman numeral on it. He could make no sense of the numerals, and the bells wouldn't shut up.

The ringing went on even long after he snapped awake—he'd fallen asleep on the floor again—and cranked up the static on the stereo. He'd been sweating in his sleep. His belly itched, and when he reached to scratch he pulled away a dry crust of bread which had bonded itself to his skin. Or maybe it'd grown out of him like a tumor.

He reached across the floor for a jelly jar with a swallow of whiskey and suicide gnats left in it. He didn't mind the gnats, which you couldn't really taste, and besides, he kind of liked the idea that he was swallowing the whiskey that swallowed the gnats that swallowed the whiskey. He dipped the crust in what was left, let it soften up before he chewed. No, that wasn't quite complete. Something had to swallow the man who'd swallowed the whiskey that'd swallowed the gnats that'd swallowed the whiskey. Maybe it never ended, everything just kept swallowing everything. So what was swallowing Waylan?

He was sweating again, even though he was pretty sure the air conditioner was running. Couldn't be sure, not with the static playing. Waylan stopped chewing. Was this rock bottom? He'd always wondered what that felt like, and maybe here it was, at last. Though things could always get worse, couldn't they? Despair was an abyss that had no dimension, no floor to it. A bottomless well of chilled ink. And the longer you lingered at the precipice, the more you became what it contained. He'd read that.

The yeasty crumbs in his mouth weren't breaking down. He'd have an easier time chewing sawdust. Enough, then. Waylan would leave the semi-desert, like he'd always promised. What was the opposite of the desert, anyway? Probably one of those Caribbean islands. He knew the one he'd like to live on. Half Moon Caye, off the coast of Belize. He'd seen it in one of the *National Geographics* the Jenkins brothers were always toting around. Looked like a little sickle of sand and palm trees floating in a big dish of blue Curaçao. Good enough, good enough. He'd have to leave Balthazar, who was probably too old to start a new life down in the tropics. Wouldn't be fair to ask the old hound to start over again. Waylan would keep the front door open when he left. He'd perimeter the yard with bowls of dog chow, and eventually Zar would grow accustomed to sleeping outdoors and living off the landscape, just like Waylan. Zar would be happier that way.

Waylan was also going to be more cautious about who and what he chose to believe in. He'd have to be more selective, and all of his future plans should revolve around one need: getting his tired ass far away from Gaston Beach. Might be a while, though. Waylan still had one more task to complete out in the semi-desert, and it wasn't up for debate.

When he was finished eating, he used his fingernail to scrape away what little gold foil still remained on his teeth. To hell with the West, both new and old. To hell with the wild animals. To hell with the Jenkins brothers, too.

## CHAPTER 38

Jefferson kept a back porch of sorts behind the paintworn A-frame shack he rented. The porch was shielded against the rain by a shoddily annexed roof of hammered tin. In the overall, he found the place shitty, but it was cheap, and that was fine. He didn't like the idea of paying lots of money to live in some place he'd never own. One day he wanted a driveway with authentic bottle caps pressed into the cement, and this dump wasn't worthy of that kind of effort.

An oil-stained eight by eight slab of concrete that might've been an aborted carport made floor space enough for two wicker chairs and a ratty stippleglass table topped with an overfull ashtray and a few tiny whiskey bottles that all tasted pretty much the same to Jefferson. The wicker on the chairs had begun to uncoil. A cracked gourd hung from the eave in its frayed macramé hanger. Flies droned past, little grumbling diesels. It was late afternoon, and already he'd lit citronella candles to stand off the mosquitoes. The dense stands of oaks on either side of the porch framed a view of choked forest growth, the mossy ground funneling refuse and water into a slow downgrade. Over the course of a half mile, this stony rut would feed into the creek, but you couldn't see the creek from here.

Sam sat fidgeting in the flimsy chair beside him and using the bottom of her shirt to polish his crummy table. He'd bought them a sack of calamari burgers. To Waylan's credit, he had to admit that the sandwiches were better than expected. In fact, they were damn good. He could still taste the salt and the grease, that pleasant fishy aftertaste you might get from a sea scallop or a good cut of ahi. Sam had been grouchy all afternoon, her legs wobbling with unchanneled frustration as she chronicled recent heartaches between her and Waylan. None of it was pleasant, and part him wished that she would leave. He watched her rattle open the lid of a tin container and pop another spearmint lozenge.



“Going a little heavy on the breath mints, don’t you think?” Jefferson said.

“Well I’ve got to do something to keep my mouth occupied now that I can’t smoke.”

“But you don’t smoke,” he said. “I mean, I never saw you smoke before.”

“That’s the point. I didn’t smoke before, but I could have. And now I can’t.” She nodded at the assortment of miniature whiskies. “Those mine, Jeff?”

Jefferson scratched his nose. He’d been hoping she wouldn’t notice. “Been buying them like that for a while now.” He crossed his arms. “But yeah, I might’ve helped myself to some of yours in the early days.”

“Feels like you’re drinking less if you buy smaller bottles?” Something in her mouth—he hoped it was the mint—gave way with a sickening pop.

“You been shacking up with Bondy, then?” He spat heavily onto the leaf litter at the patio’s perimeter. He could call her out, too, if she wanted to talk rough.

“Why’d I be staying with her?”

Jefferson shrugged, felt himself turning red.

“Must be a lot of talking going on when I’m not around,” she said. “Anyway, I figured I needed a break from her. Needed a break from everyone.”

“Okay, then.”

“I’m staying with my folks, since you asked.”

“Fine.”

“You think I’m being selfish by not telling him?”

“I didn’t say that.” Christ, she’d been so defensive lately. “Hell, I don’t have a say on it either way. That’s between you and him.”

“Best years of my life. How many of them do I have to spend playing shrink to him in addition to every local problem child? It’s not supposed to work like that.”

“Sure.”

“He’s a grown man. He can’t rely on one person for his happiness.”

“Got no family, then?”

“He’s got a father all but bedridden, a mother he never hears from.”

“I see.”

“Now that’s selfish—to take and take and take and give nothing back. Like some kind of parasitic—” She waved her frantic hand at an imaginary pest. “I don’t know what.”

“Did sound like he was getting better, though.”

“Ups and downs,” she said, popping another mint. “No doubt he’s a sweet enough man, but is he cut out to be somebody’s daddy?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Probably best not to make any hasty decisions.”

“Sometimes parenting can sort of grow people up,” she said, rocking back and forth in her seat. “I’ve seen it happen before. Puts your problems in a different light when you’ve got a child to take care of. Maybe it would be like that for him.”

“He does make a poor appearance, though. Marching the highway in that pioneer mess. Now that’s neither here nor there, but even so. It puts me off.”

“I figured he was just out for attention, but if he keeps it up we might have to have him committed.”

“Didn’t see him out there yesterday at all. Maybe he’s come to his senses.”

“Hope so.”

“Least he’s not dangerous. Other than trying to run me over, I mean.”

Sam pulverized another mint.

“But he does deserve to know, Sam. He deserves that much.”

“What about you?” she said.

“You think I should tell him?” She was more out of sorts than he’d guessed.

“No, I mean what’s your stake in all of this, Jeff? You hanging around here like bad news. I’d like to know what this is all adding up to.”

“Suppose I like it here.” He didn’t like having to explain himself. Felt like she was putting him on his heels.

“I know about you and Bondy. And I know that you know about me and Bondy.”

For some reason it felt more embarrassing to hear it out loud.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I don’t care. But I don’t think Bondy’s what’s keeping you here.”

“I suppose not.”

Sam was sneering now. “Who, then?”

“I told you, I just like it here.”

“Is it Waylan? You know full well you’re not really his brother. I think even Waylan stopped believing you were.”

“You don’t know that,” he said, though he could feel his heart falling out of pace.

“Were you really in jail?”

“Just one of those overnight stays.” Christ, he’d already given away too much, and now it was difficult to stop. “They found me naked and drunk and trying to sink to the bottom of some rich lady’s fountain. Got a little too wrapped up in a role I was playing.”

“So you really are an actor.”

“Still waiting for my big break.” He meant to say that playfully, but it didn’t sound playful. Might even be possible that he still believed it.

“Why Waylan? Tell me now and I’ll leave you alone. Because if that whole Reeve act was because you were curious to see a man like Waylan fall apart, well I swear to God I’ll dedicate the rest of my life to making yours miserable.”

“Jesus Christ, Sam.” He was waiting for her to crack, but no, she didn’t look away. “I can’t believe you’d even say it. I’ve only tried to help him. You know that.”

“So tell me. Why Waylan?” She leaned forward over the table.

Jefferson folded his hands and licked his mouth. “I swear it’s nothing bad. Matter of fact I feel a little silly.” With good reason, too. He’d sound like a fool.

She placed a hand on the rough skin of his arm. “I promise I won’t laugh.”

“Waylan seemed to need a brother so bad. Guess I just thought, what’s so bad about that? I liked it, that feeling that I could help someone out. You know, to be there, just in case he called on me.”

She drew her hand away and unboxed a mint. “You think he might call on you?” She said it very slowly, for maximum humiliation.

“I don’t know. I hope one day he might.”

Sam leaned back and put a finger over the box. She didn’t seem so restless now. Was she just testing him?

“That okay with you?” he said.

“Okay with me. Naïve, maybe. But okay.”

“I suppose naïve is the right word.”

She *was* testing him.

Jefferson watched her recross her legs and lean back into the wicker chair. He was pretty sure she hadn't really come here for the serious conversation. She would've had enough of that already with Waylan and with Bondy. Now she'd want a break from all that heavy talk. He gave her his best shrewd look and tried to cook up a playful line.

"What?" She smiled at him, mint lodged between her front teeth.

"It just came to me. The real reason why you wanted to come over."

"That a fact?" she said, suppressing a smile. "Try me."

Jefferson closed his eyes and drummed on his temple, like he was channeling the answer through space waves and radiation. He'd better not say something stupid, or anything that implied screwing. That'd be too bold. She definitely wouldn't go for that. Got to be more subtle. He popped his eyes open an instant later, then winked. "It's less about Waylan," he said, still drumming. "Less about me, too."

"You're stalling, Jeff."

"And it's more about you already getting tired of living with your folks."

"Maybe," she said, stormy eyes rolling.

"Bet they watch way too much *Columbo* and fart aloud every time they get up for a cup of decaf. Am I right?"

Her laughter came slowly, quietly.

"Your dad wheeze out of his nose whenever he eats a sandwich?"

Still smirking, Sam popped another mint. He might get nothing else right for the rest of her visit, but at least he'd gotten her to laugh.

## CHAPTER 39

Waylan spent the first evenings gathering a variety of buckets. Some of the more affluent homes near the downtown strip were being repainted, and the crews often left a good many plastic paint pails stored in the carports or under scaffolding. He pulled out the paintbrushes and plastic liners and kept the pails. He also came away with a good many of the heavier five-gallon buckets. Then a wooden step ladder caught his eye. The buckets stacked one within another between the ladder rungs, so that he had a pretty inconspicuous cargo suitable to ride on the bicycle gurney, which he covered with a tarp.

One night he removed a partial hay bale and a roll of wire mesh from a foreclosed ranch. Against better judgment, Waylan wore his common street clothes for these tasks. His disappointment in the Jenkinses graced him with the defiance of the abandoned. Though he still spotted wild game—some of them mechanical—along the highway, he took to sneering at them. He chased away giraffes, whipped stones at the black bears that trailed him.

He worked long, dogged hours, trying his best to stay focused and keep his mind moored on the desert. He spent long hours out on the arid flats that ran just beyond the more untamed branches of the creek. In these remote reaches, a broad spit of desert ran between distant crop fields irrigated in part by creek water. Waylan toed the scorched red ground, sifted the soil through his fingers, sniffed at its dryness. Familiar figures came within view, and Waylan watched them with little interest. There were more tasks waiting for him, and he was eager to finish up and be gone already.

The flats were a favored locale of wayward drunks and substance users in need of open spaces. At night, their lanterns swung over the ground like some *ignis fatuus* of the badlands. Many of the wanderers assembled tents. Others slept with their heels to the ground and starlight

tickling their cheeks. Sometimes he saw Jefferson or Reeve at a safe remove, but Waylan was too busy for talking.

One night he was sure he saw Sam moving north along the creek. He gave a courteous wave and turned back to the stark landscape. Myles liked to pick blackberries down by the creek and then venture out to the cacti flats to collect the remaining constituents for his strange meals. Waylan cheered him on.

“The clock needs rain,” he called. He was trying to make peace with Myles these days, just in case the kid really could command the weather.

Waylan was content to sleep outdoors, near his modest campfires. His buckets made a honeycomb pattern around his campfire, an army at ease, mouths gaping. He stored the hay in a pile of black garbage sacks, the drawstrings knotted.

The first step was making the skeleton. Using wire clippers to isolate each section, he crafted the bipedal armature from wire mesh and iron rods and the scrap metal from several ruined shopping carts. He constructed it in such a way that the giant poised over the ground, its torso angled forward like it was struggling against a terrible wind. By the time he began sculpting the giant’s shoulders, he had to stand on the ladder’s higher rungs.

Even hunched, the giant’s skeleton stood at least two-thirds taller than a normal person’s. Though unfinished, the giant was more convincing than he had expected. He still needed rain, and once the rain came, he could complete it.

#

One morning he woke late in the morning to the sound of thunder clapping smartly against the semi-desert floor. The western edge of the hardpan went hazy beneath a solid curtain of water that stained the ground a darker red. The wind picked up, carrying damp air and the

stale odor of dust. *Petrichor*, his father had once called it. Waylan tore his shirt free as the first drops fell. Then his pants and shoes. He held his arms up in the cool and clean-tasting rain. In moments, his bare feet trod a warm and rusty slop. Waylan cheered for Myles at the top of his lungs, and though he couldn't see the creek through the heavy rain, he felt certain that the boy was nearby, watching.

Waylan wasted no time using the shovel to break up the hardpan and let it soak. When a patch became workable, he loaded the slop into one of the buckets and poured off the excess water. He sealed the paint buckets with squares of clear plastic. He relidded the five-gallon sorts. The storm had steered far to the north when he loaded the last one.

The flooded ground bubbled and stewed under his feet, squishy between his toes. Waylan's spit of desert was a darker—a better—shade of red, and he wished it would stay that way. He smiled to see that his giant had made it through the storm. The little intersections of crossed wire held water drops, so that the structure resembled a kind of person-shaped chandelier. He opened up the legs of his ladder and stood it beside the sculpture. Then he carried a trowel and a mud bucket up the ladder and set about covering the sculpture.

He smeared clay over the giant's head and shoulders, working his way downward from there. Before long it was lunchtime, so he climbed down from the ladder, dumped a can of beef stew into his only pot, and parked it over the coals. The sun lingered directly overhead, cooking dry spots into the wet clay of the giant's shoulders. The whiskey bottles were all empty, so he busied himself playing the ruined guitar. He was inspired to play brighter melodies in the days of the giant, songs of redemption, of odysseys and spiritual quests that got fulfilled. He found it easier to appreciate the desert now that he was leaving it, his thoughts circling back to that little



island off the Belizean coast. Feral iguanas basking in the sunshine, coconuts freshly-split, Caribbean reefs populated with gaudy fishes.

As the stew came to a boil over the coals, he watched a pair of Aplomado falcons wheel in over the flats. Their tails flared like paper fans as they fell upon small animals driven from their flooded burrows. Maybe he didn't hate the semi-desert as much as it hated itself.

## CHAPTER 40

They sat on the porch and for a long time neither of them spoke. Dressed in her panties and one of Jefferson's *Tool* tour shirts, Sam eyed the path of that brambly downgrade that eventually fed into the creek. She stretched the shirt over her belly, trying to make sense of the silk-screened images—a flying eyeball ensnared by a parabolic grid, or maybe it was a spider's web. The visual language of a juvenile occultist. Reminded her of the pagan nonsense you found on the back of paper money. Jefferson wore a faded crimson bathrobe over his shoulders. He sat hunched over with his hands on his knees, watching with great agony the progress of an enormous black and red cow ant as it passed between his feet. She wondered what it reminded him of.

“I should probably go,” she said. “Think we've made a mistake.”

“You're single now. Why so regretful all of a sudden?”

“He'd still see it as a betrayal.”

“That what this is all about?”

“Of course not. I've just reached a point where I need change. Although you could argue that I'm failing at that, too, you pretending to be his brother and all.”

“Would he rather you run around with some slimeball he doesn't even know, or would he rather you at least take company with someone he knows to be decent?” Jefferson waited, smiling, like she couldn't help but agree with him.

“You think he trusts you?”

Jefferson began peeling away the label of a tiny whiskey bottle with his fingernail. She hoped that he realized how silly he sounded.

“Well maybe we better not tell him anything at all,” he said. Then he dropped his voice to a lower register. “You know, so as not to upset him any further.”

“I think it was him I saw out there on the flats. Out there where the old hippies like to camp.”

“Bondy seems pretty sure of it,” Jefferson said.

“Guess I haven’t been good about keeping up with her.”

“Maybe you’ve been too busy casting judgment on yourself and others. Anyway, Waylan’s made some kind of sculpture out there. Bondy says there’s a bunch of folks camping right up close to it.”

“What did he make out there?” It was always difficult to predict what new fixation might captivate Waylan, whether it was clocks, lamps, squid, cowboys. Maybe he’d been tracing Reeve’s silhouette into the dirt so that his brother’s image occupied the entirety of the flats, threatening to spill its borders and overtake the town.

“Says they’re calling it the clay man,” Jefferson said.

“Is she sure it doesn’t look like a pregnant lady?” Sam said, thinking of Myles and the gifts he liked to leave.

“She’s only seen it from afar, but apparently it’s a big statue made of dirt.”

Sam placed a mint under her tongue. Of course, a clay man could just as easily work as a totem for Reeve. Bondy had never met Waylan’s brother, and she might not recognize a statue cast in his likeness. Even so, Jefferson’s account put an off taste in her mouth—a shot of saccharine when she’d had her mouth set for true sugar. Didn’t seem like Waylan’s style to build a statue of Reeve—that would be too direct for him. She felt a nagging suspicion that whatever he’d made out there on the flats, this time it didn’t really concern his brother.

## CHAPTER 41

Myles knew what it meant to steal, and he understood that he'd been robbed of something valuable. He felt bad enough knowing that Waylan Dranger got to live with Ms. Sam, whose smile Myles was still trying—and failing—to piece together from discarded magazines. But now Waylan had to go and ugly up the flatlands with his giant dirt man. Myles stood on the eastern bank with his back to the creek, bare feet still all silver-slick from wading across. He glared at the new dirt man where it bullied the clay flats, Myles himself among its victims.

Whole gangs of admirers had wandered out to the flats like pilgrims to see the dirt man. *Fool-pilgrims* was what they were. They ate those chewy squid sandwiches from Lafitte's and then bumble-butted out over the flats to gawk at the giant and snap pictures. They left snail-trails of plastic food wrappers and bottles. At night, they put their lanterns on the ground so that the dirt man was all spooky-lit from underneath. You could see it from a mile away, the dirt man sly and mean-looking in the wavering light, like he wanted to pop your head off and suck down what was slippery inside. A lot of the fool-pilgrims breathed smoke from glass pipes or stuck their arms with needles or licked what he figured were sheets of postage stamps. They'd all lost their minds.

A lot of them slept long hours at the dirt man's feet and making *rip-rap* snore noises. Waylan Dranger had been among the sleepers those first days. Some of the fool-pilgrims wanted him to talk about the dirt man, but instead of talking, Waylan turned over and burrowed deep into his bedding and slept on like Myles's mother always did when she didn't want to talk.

Myles was back the next morning, spying on them all from a safe distance. Made him feel weird and sorry, but he couldn't resist. When Waylan woke up and saw that the fool-pilgrims meant to stay, he went all funny in the face, different now in a way Myles couldn't quite

name, just that feeling that something dangerous could happen. He knew the way that meanness could settle into the air. Smelled a lot like a hot skillet right before someone threw it at the wall.

Waylan looked like he was being tormented by head-fleas. So Myles made his way in for a closer glance. Waylan's eyes went red as they angled back and forth, like they were singling out people he hated from empty air. Myles watched him hiss and growl until he worked up a froth on his lips. Then he began taking his own head into his dirty hands, fingers locked in a tight brain-basket over the top of his head. He brought the flats of his hands to his temple and pressed them together hard, like he had a bad itch somewhere in his head. Some of the fool-pilgrims started paying attention to Waylan, and more than one clan began recording him with their cameras as he pried at his own skull and jabbered about a worm. Myles didn't like the cameras—the *snip* noises they made, like they were untangling strings of the world and drinking them up through the lens. He kept trying to step out of frame. One fool-pilgrim finally offered Waylan some water, asked was there someone he could call for. Waylan hollered, *There is no such rectifier*. Then he stood, turned his back to the fool-pilgrims, and walked toward the creek, dirty blanket caping over his shoulders. Myles didn't see him after that.

The worst part was that some of the fool-pilgrims started talking to the dirt man, telling it secrets, begging it for advice, though the dirt man couldn't talk. Myles listened to the fool-pilgrims as they talked about what the dirt man meant. Some claimed that it reflected the fact that people were little more than space dust blessed or cursed with self-awareness. *So elegant*, they kept saying. Others said the dirt man stood for all gods ever, since it was hollow as a pumpkin, and made by a person. And still others said the dirt man stood for all people. All this lofty talk was confusing, especially since Myles knew the dirt man's creator—Waylan Dranger—and had watched him climb the ladder to spread his crude palette of hay and muck over the wire frame.

Waylan Dranger wasn't a very good artist. He couldn't even spread the mud without dropping his buckets, which got him cussing like crazy.

From a distance, the dirt man appeared smooth, but Myles had seen it up close, hay fibers prickling the surface. Little kinks of wire showed under the arms in places where the mud hadn't spread evenly or got gravelly like peanut butter. Meanwhile, the fool-pilgrims offered no appreciation for Myles's works, which filled the desert even now, not that the fool-pilgrims ever noticed. Whereas Waylan had blessed the flats with one ugly figure that took up way too much room, Myles had spent years gracing the town with figures that could be carried with one hand and left on a doorstep, or secreted away in rocky crevices, or—his favorite—stuck between cactus paws. Myles's figures went pretty much undiscovered, except sometimes by those who wandered the desert carrying needles or smoke or snortable powders. Those folks might carry one of his figures a few miles, only to carelessly drop it as they sort of woke up from the trance. So the gist of it was that Myles didn't get much recognition. And unlike Waylan's dumb old dirt man, all of Myles's clay figures were polished smooth. His work showed no hay fibers, no crumbly edges.

What was it about the Drangers that they had to make everything such a big fat deal? Hadn't Reeve's disappearance gotten enough attention? Then there were his nasty squid sandwiches, which everybody kept buying, even though they sounded gross, and would never be welcome inside Myles's mouth, no matter how hungry he got. But sandwiches hadn't been enough. Waylan Dranger had to block out the sky with this dirt man, take all the attention for himself. Why not just build a big neon sign that flashed his name?

Myles parted his lips and sniffed the air. Two days earlier, it had rained. The same day Waylan put the skin on his giant. Myles concentrated on the air, how it felt, how dry it tasted. He

was almost sure that it'd rain again the following afternoon. Never soon enough. He closed his eyes and imagined a shadow closing over the flats in that instant, stormy winds snapping up the sand in quick little pinwheels. The rain that would fall and fall, hot jags of lightning stinging the ground, floodwaters bubbling up to carry away the fool-pilgrims, and, best of all, Waylan's dirt man, which would be water-wasted right down to its crappy wire frame and swept into the Gulf with the other trash. Of course, no storm like that was coming or Myles would be able to smell it.

## CHAPTER 42

Waylan spent his nights following the advent of his clay man wallowing under the boardwalk, where the isolation and the sound of the distant waves brought him comfort enough to doze. Someone had stolen his broken rifle while he was sleeping, and these days he carried the the sea in an old glass bottle. He'd found it half-buried in the sand under the boardwalk among a few clay figurines he took to be Myles's. The bottle held a layer of rubbing alcohol dyed blue, with a lighter layer of mineral spirits riding on top in an approximation of clear skies. A plastic sailboat rode the boundary zone between the two liquids. This was the sort of craft project was popular when Waylan was a kid, like paper airplanes, or matchstick rockets—Reeve's favorite.

Waylan held the glass up to the light that broke through the splayed boards overhead and watched the bottled waves knock around. Waylan tilted the bottle, the tiny plastic sailboat inside bobbing in the wash, riding the division between the two opposed liquids, some molecular schism at work so that ocean and sky remained neatly divided. A perfect little world, where everything was contained and boaters never drowned.

Pictures had always moved him more than words. Now he imagined palm trees, stainless blue waters under clear skies, a café table overlooking the beach, tilting just a little under the weight of a platter loaded with steaming red crabs and a saucer of melted butter. A sandy little island hemmed in by tropical reefs and governed by Waylan and a crew of his tiny followers. Monkeys and dogs were just easier to get along with, why not admit it? All the while, he became more and more convinced that those Caribbean reefs were where he belonged. There, he'd find something real and pure and true—the path to a fogless world.



## CHAPTER 43

A mile north of the clay man and the desert flats, the creek coursed through a swale between knuckled hillsides. Here, the banks were crowded with a few younger bald cypresses and some short scrub oaks and dense hedges of palmettos. Sam sat on a towel in the shadow of a lone magnolia tree on the west bank, watching flow patterns form and vanish on the surface of the creek. She liked watching the water, its surface shifting in and out of phase. It'd been a long day dealing with patients whose problems felt—and this was only happening most recently—very remote to her. Always with their problems, always with their need-need-needs. What about Sam's needs? She still hadn't decided what to do with the tiny life in her belly. Each day she found herself more and more child-like in her ability to deceive herself, thinking tomorrow she'd find Waylan and tell him, tomorrow she'd be decisive.

She only wanted to sit there sucking breath mints and meditating far enough from town, far enough from the crowds that Waylan's clay man drew. Now that was really something—Waylan's giant. Couldn't bring himself to go see a movie or an art show with her, but the moment she leaves him he's got the energy to build a giant out on the flats? What was it supposed to mean, anyway?

She was brainstorming ways to open up the hypothetical conversation with Waylan when the bobbing heads of three small monkeys appeared upstream. They were gifted swimmers, their little faces pinched against the surface glare, water lapping at their necks. How had she managed to live so long without realizing that East Texas supported its own indigenous primates? Sam caught herself. It felt perverse, seeing them here. The animals themselves appeared stunned. She bent lower to see.

Dogs barked upriver, their voices softened by the thick brush along the creek. Then a man's voice called from a bend upstream. Was someone singing? Three painted simian heads swung away from her. Good. Whoever was coming could verify or disprove the monkeys, who now clambered from the creek and stood together on a flat rock some ten paces from the magnolia. The man's voice called on, closer now, and the monkeys began shaking themselves dry. One little guy wrung his tail with alarming dexterity, spattering the legs of his mates in the process.

Moments later, the raft hove into view, spinning wildly. Its floor was made from plywood and it was buoyed up by a great mass of empty plastic bottles lashed together in a fishing net. The flimsy captain's chair, which was probably parsed together from collapsible lawn furniture, was occupied by none other than Waylan. He wore a canvas bucket hat, the brim so wet that the sides drooped over his ears sort of like an aviator's helmet. His face was shaggy with stubble, his eyes socketed in grime.

The whole raft was only slightly wider than his chair, most of the excess space occupied by plastic jugs and canvas packs. Some half-dozen monkeys clambered over Waylan's lap and his shoulders and all sides of the raft. He looked like a shit-faced ferryman shuttling monkey souls to their afterlife. And a dwindling crew it was. Even as Sam watched, the monkeys on board balked and bated at the edge of the raft. She watched one brave member leap into the current and swim toward the three who stood on the flat rock, watching and squealing, the sound of barking dogs growing sharper now.

She really wanted to just turn and go. Let him sink if that was what he wanted. She didn't have the tools to deal with the raft, the monkeys, the Gilligan hat. This was beyond her. Why couldn't he just blow through on his raft when she wasn't around to see it?

When Waylan's flotilla swept alongside Sam, he still wouldn't make eye contact. She called his name and he glanced back at her with a brief hesitation that might have been recognition, but that was all. She watched the raft drift into an eddy, Waylan gripping his armrests to keep from going overboard. He giggled like a fool and traced a spiral in the air with his finger. *Daddy?* Spoken in the voice of an androgyne child, the word blew around in Sam's mind, where it hung like a hitchhiker seed. *Daddy?* A child shouldn't hear such stories. The hat, the raft, the frightened monkeys. Sam had never been a big believer in *normal*, but now she could appreciate the sense in it. Someone to come home to—an uncomplicated Atticus-type, vanilla, predictable, reasonably upstanding, but not too self-sacrificial. Someone with just enough soccer knowledge to coach children. All that Waylan wasn't.

"Never a direct course," Waylan screamed.

"Where is it you're headed?" she said, running to catch up.

"Half Moon Caye," he said. "Coast of Belize." Like it was nothing. Now his eyes pinched shut, like he was trying not to get sick.

"You've decided to die, then?"

"Just want a good view of the moon." He opened his pink pig's eyes, adjusted the wilted hat. "We're going to have this rig fitted for sails down there. Start a whole new campaign."

"You've been drinking."

"Not a drop."

"Drugs?"

He wiggled his head and frowned. "Such a hard word, that." No telling what was kicking around in his system, especially if he'd been hanging out the hippies out on the flats. Maybe she could stall him, or at least understand who or what had its claws in him.

“So why leave just this moment?” she said. She had to try. Just try. She owed him nothing more.

As he framed a response, his raft ran upon a line of rocks and stalled in the current, allowing Sam time to catch up. A single monkey hopped from the raft, scrambled up onto the bank, and swished between saw palms.

“That thing out on the flats.” He toed at the floor. “People misunderstand. It’s not a monument. More of a clock, you might say.”

“A clock?”

He shrugged, still not looking, monkeys swarming madly underfoot.

“What does it measure, Waylan? I didn’t see any dials on it.”

“Would life on the moon insulate us from that awful wind, do you think?” No telling what he was going on about now. She didn’t feel much wind coming off the creek.

“What wind do you mean?”

“Got myself a hunch that the moon’s closer than everyone thinks. You think we’ll make it far enough out in the Caribbean? Far enough from the clocks?” He patted his thigh. “I can’t know.”

“Waylan, tell me what it measures.”

Waylan sighed. A pair of scar-bellied Labradors crashed through the palmettos on the west bank and bolted down to the water to bark and wail at the monkeys on the other side. Waylan began rummaging around in one of the packs. He held up a plastic baggie full of wild-colored pills. He popped a few of them into his mouth and held the baggie out for Sam. If he were any closer, she’d slug him right on the jaw, not out of anger but compassion—a knuckle sandwich cut diagonally, to knock him senseless, save him from any further ruination.

A grimace came over Waylan's face. With visible effort, he swallowed, then reached out and braced himself against the obstructing rocks. He turned back and gave Sam a bawdy wink.

"Tastes like the floor of a gymnasium," he said.

"I'll bet."

"Hey, you ever hear that old legend about grandfather clocks and their owners?"

God, he never got tired of that one. "When the owners die the clocks stop working. You've mentioned it before."

"That's the one."

"You're not going to die, Waylan. It's just a bit of lore." Even so, she couldn't help wondering if Waylan's death would make the situation more bearable. Maybe it would be nobler if he finally disappeared along with Reeve. Martyred fathers were gifted with blamelessness, while institutionalized fathers were cursed with stigmas. If the creek swallowed Waylan right now, she'd be free to tell a less painful version of the truth. *Your father died trying to save his brother*, for instance. No humane person would call it a lie. Of course, it didn't matter. Waylan would survive the creek, in addition to whatever other water bodies he happened upon. She'd seen that wild light in his eyes before. He'd find his way.

"All clocks meter out ruin and decay," he said. "I'm not sure what the figure in the desert means beyond that. Could be a test."

"It's not a clock, Waylan. It's only a sculpture, and sculptures can't hurt people. Well, maybe Bondy's sculptures can, but only if you bump into them."

"They're all clocks." He was nearly shouting. "Each and every one. But the big son of a bitch, he makes me nervous. I mean, you can't know exactly what form of time a clock measures until you've let it run for a while, right?"

Better to let him ramble. Maybe he'd stumble his way to something coherent. Maybe she could talk him down just once more.

"That's it," he said. He sounded exhausted, and she was hoping maybe he'd dock the raft and be done with the whole charade before he drowned the rest of his monkeys. "Call it goodbye. I'm tired of dirt. I'm tired of cowboys and pirates. And I won't be back."

"You'll just as soon be tired of Belize or the moon or wherever it is you think you're headed. You know that, don't you?"

"You're probably right. But at least for a while it'll all be new. And besides, I can't let them down." He motioned to what remained of his gibbering mates. However backward this scenario, it bothered Sam that he didn't seem to need her. Ridiculous as it was, part of her would've liked to be invited, not that she actually wanted to go with him.

"Take me along," she called, a final effort to delay him, and it probably wouldn't work.

"Afraid we're operating at capacity," Waylan said, eyes losing focus. He pushed hard against the rocks and the raft scraped and creaked and swung free. "We could've done this a long time ago, but you waited too long," he said. Then he smirked and nodded to his tiny crewmembers, delighted by this particular combination of words. "She waited too long," he yelled, stressing different syllables this time, pointing Sam out for the monkeys to see. "Oh, I hate to say it," he crooned, gesturing with his hands and arms like a lounge lizard, "but she's just waited too damn long." However far gone the rest of him, his singing voice was still pretty good. This was not the time to drop important news, but between rafting expeditions and clay men, when would there be a fitting moment? The proper time would never come.

"Waylan," she said, "I'm pregnant."

Waylan stopped singing. He sat blinking as the current dragged his raft off the rocks and back to the creek's swift-moving heart. He vanished around a bend downstream, head bowed like he was concentrating hard on the monkeys as they clambered over his lap. A disturbing tranquility expanded in his wake, the water lapping neatly over the rocks, the current tracing elegant patterns on the water. No lingering evidence that he ever passed through. A mile downriver, he'd be carried past his clay man where it stood guard over the flats. Maybe he'd turn his back or close his eyes, cowed by his own sculpture. Sam snorted. So sad to fear your own creation.

A few miles south of the flats, the creek emptied out into the channel, which itself drained into the Gulf. He wouldn't make it to Belize, but beyond that, there was no telling where he might end up. Now she faced a choice that she liked a lot less than the question of whether or not to share the news with Waylan. Would it be worse to stop his rafting expedition or to let him bring it to completion?

Dogs barked from far beyond the thicket now, their voices growing faint as they trailed monkeys over the barrens.

## CHAPTER 44

The gritty tongue of an enormous kaleidoscope cat laps away the skin of his cheek, and the sensation isn't entirely unpleasant. Waylan can feel its saliva pooling and scattering like mercury beneath him. He cracks open a single eye, the world around him grown impossibly dark and immediate. A gear in the cosmic machinery has come unmeshed, has shunted him into the moment—cold, tactile, transitive. Geometric moss frames his periphery.

He was far out in the Gulf when he finally closed his eyes to rest, the promise of waking to open water still warm in his chest, though beneath it lurked a bitter memory of Sam and what she'd said just before he rounded that bend. Better not to dwell on those words, or try to remember. He's lost so many dull-lit years to contemplation. Now is the time. What's to lose beyond what you already know can't be found? Strike a match against the volcano's inner rim. Run a jackhammer into the fault line. Bring your hips against the beehive, push your way inside, and savor the hum. Come forth as gold, come forth as a brass tooth.

He rolls onto his back and wipes the clammy beach sand from his face, his cheek raw where he has lain on it. Seawater surges over his feet. Has he made his escape, then? Are these the sickled shores of Half Moon Caye? In his heart, he knows it's a fool's hope. These shores curve too gently, a far cry from the sharp cut of an actual half moon. He knows this beach, the same one he has visited all his life. He spots the raft where it made landfall a few yards away, now partially mired in the sand, now monkeyless.

Flattened arrow shapes mark the beach. Squid. Of course. He has been discarded among a cluster of the beached monsters, which now sit cupped in the sand like ruined desserts. As if in sympathy, the sky cracks white in a rapid sequence of flashes, a cosmic arrangement of cameras



all malfunctioning at once. Then the far-off thunder, a beat behind. Mature thunderstorms gather over the Gulf, interior lightning revealing their purple cauliflower walls.

Waylan pulls off his canvas hat and runs his fingers through his tangled hair, the pixilated after-image of thunderclouds and squid conflating and playing in glitchy animation on the backs of his closed eyelids, and finally dissolving into fractals. Spooky, like peeking into the bloodstream of creation. He opens his eyes. The feeble waves wear on, stars overhead bobbling out from their dark sockets like eyespots. Constellations strike their familiar orientations. What he suspects is Jupiter swings under the moon, a cold and pendulous mineral. Among the reflected stars, the likeness of a Ferris wheel dips and winks, and he knows for sure now that it's no other Ferris wheel than that which graces the boardwalk he has haunted for so many summers. Reeve always said that Waylan would never have the guts to leave. Right again, Reeve. Right again.

Waylan pulls off his boots and pours out the seawater. There's a brief show of phosphorescence as whole generations of dinoflagellates expire in the sand. He's feeling wistful enough to give the wet sand a consolatory pat, a sigh for their silent and microscopic misfortunes. He stands the boots side by side and stares at the water for a while, the universe having become an easy thing to disturb. Then he picks up the nearest boot and flings it into the water, causing a brief fragmentation of the moon's reflection, because he, too, is an easy thing to disturb. No moon, then. No Half Moon Caye. Looks like he'll be going to the boardwalk.

"Call off the moon, then," Waylan says. As he speaks, something behind him becomes animated, skitters away. He turns to catch a glimpse of the small animal heading inland, sending a shower of loose sand as it flees. In the feeble light of the squid, Waylan can just make out the dark form of a lone monkey. "Mutineer," Waylan cries. He staggers upright and lurches headlong for the tiny animal, which dodges him with ease. He loses his footing, sand rushing up

against his raw cheek as he topples. The monkey stands a few paces away, chattering and listing over drunkenly while Waylan brushes sand from his lips. “How many of those pills did you goddamn eat?” Waylan wants to know.

He gropes in the sand until he’s got a good handful of seashell fragments—the good, sharp, skin-cutter kind. He lets them fly in a bright slash of calcium shards, which the monkey easily slips, the little show-off. Waylan comes to his feet and nods, he who can admit when he has been bested. The mushrooms stew painfully in his otherwise vacant gut, but he manages to pull on his remaining boot without losing his balance. The monkey ventures closer, inquisitive little guy. Probably just wants to play chase. Waylan giggles and charges again, the monkey squealing with delight, and in this fashion he pursues his last remaining shipmate over dunes and past sea oats, the monkey always out of reach and all but overwhelmed by new stimuli, like the enormous lighted wheel suspended over the strip. Waylan and the monkey are on the same level, the same frequency.

Though the wheel is familiar enough, Waylan begins seeing it from different angles, ignoring the gondolas and their passengers, who’ve missed the point entirely. Never a direct line. He watches the lights radiate outward from the center of the wheel, throwing prismatic colors. The wheel is more like a gateway now than an amusement, like maybe the point isn’t to ride the circle’s perimeter after all, but to pass through the center. Not just a mindless ride, but a kind of cosmic egress, a nap in the fabric of space-time. Will he pass through said egress whole? Or, if not, can he at least gawk through the center of the vortex at whatever gawks back?—be extruded into some calamitous elsewhere in the form of human toothpaste? Waylan likes these possibilities pretty much equally. Here’s what he has struggled for. His true goal, his center, was

never Reeve, never the Jenkinses, never any island. It has always been here, waiting for him, and him alone, and now he knows it. This wheel is what spins the world itself into being.

An atavistic symbology begins taking order in the synchronized lights. Back and forth over the wheel's outsized spokes run the very arithmetic that gives structure to the universe, imparting mass and gravity and order to mere ephemera. The code that underpins it all exposed at last as a winking sphincter of colored lights. Waylan totters on unsteady legs, his jaw gone slack. He can't read these forms, not exactly, but he can follow them in his own ponderous way. The figures and hieroglyphs dazzling his eyes feel more like forms remembered than learned. He's on the verge of comprehending a fundamental truth about his fellows, Waylan partaking in that ancient mystic dream inscribed in the minds of even the earliest proto-humans, who, in their desperation one chilly paleolithic dawn, clutched up a handful of paltry mushrooms and upon digesting them, felt for the first time atonement with the sun that swung its silent fire up over the rim of the world, how illusive the distances that separate earth and sky. Touch the sky and see the clouds scatter. They knew it all already, wandering, passing on their violent legacies, their archetypal madnesses, stealing early glances at fractal patterns whose mysteries weighed on their massive hearts, inspired god fear. Who could look at such a rupture and not imagine gods and devils leering back?

Waylan has lost track of the monkey by the time he arrives at the turnstiles that flank the Ferris wheel. If he understands little else, he at least knows that the gates and barriers surrounding the wheel are designed to keep people like him out. The line keeps getting shorter. Every time he looks up, more people have been ingested by the gates. Must be careful. Must be so careful. He watches a new round of passengers take their seats. He's still a bit chilly from the psychedelic cat-bath, but feeling pretty good overall. One problem, though: distrust in the eyes of

his fellow parkgoers. They're paying too much attention to his soggy clothes, his shoeless left foot. He'll win them over with smiling, disarm the sons of bitches. Waylan says nothing, just smiles and smiles until his cheeks cramp.

"Ticket," the gatekeeper says as Waylan presses against the polished stiles.

Waylan doffs his bucket hat and gives a formal bow, smiling still.

"Ticket, sir," the gatekeeper says.

"What's?" His mouth isn't working.

"Let's have your ticket." The gatekeeper is shifty, like he needs a bowel movement. Should Waylan mention that? Ask the guy if he needs a bowel movement? Maybe Waylan should offer to gatekeep while he goes off and relieves himself. Might show that Waylan is concerned, that he cares about others' well-being.

"Happens to the best of us," Waylan says. The gatekeeper guy doesn't respond to that, so Waylan fumbles around in his pockets and finally offers up a soggy nautical chart. That'll show him. He smiles expansively and holds the map out for the gatekeeper, who glances about like someone is having a joke at his expense. Christ. What more does he want? Guy finally shakes his head, and with waning confidence, Waylan empties his pockets. No tickets in there. He's so close, though. He can practically touch the beautiful wheel.

"I am drafted to prepare a list of personal referenda," Waylan says. "Dr. Jable can confirm that I say who I am."

"Need a ticket to ride."

"Check your once list. No, time the list one more." Waylan closes his eyes in an effort to concentrate. He can do this, can explain himself. It's important. "Listen, I'm supposed to be here.

Some very powerful forces—” he trails off, and continues gesturing with a rolling motion. Hands explain better. Words just cling to the tongue.

“Maybe so,” the gatekeeper says, “but you don’t get through without a ticket.”

Ten minutes later, Waylan is back at the turnstiles, the gatekeeper weary at his return. He won’t get another chance, not judging by the guy’s eat-shit look. Waylan is no stranger to such looks, but he’s got a plan this time. Waylan smiles as planned, but his eyelids are broken. He has to tilt back his head way back to make eye contact. People trust you if you smile a lot and make good eye contact, like Sam does. Now he’ll hit the gatekeeper with phase two of the plan: the false crisis.

“My brother,” Waylan says. “He got there and he’s too much height. Understand? Alone, young rider. How about you—let me?”

The gatekeeper rolls his eyes and checks out the wheel. “Well which seat’s he in?”

“Next matter,” Waylan says, trying to be cool. You win more people over if you play it cool. “Any of them suits me just fine-o.”

“Is that right?”

“I’m easy-peasy. Like Sunday morning.”

“Did I not just send you away a minute ago?”

Waylan tries feigning confusion, but worries that it comes off like a poor impression of a noir detective. Hard to act properly with his eyelids malfunctioning, and now his cheek muscles are locked. He can’t stop smiling.

“Maybe you need to check your little treasure map?” the gatekeeper says.

Waylan shrugs, can’t gauge whether the guy’s being sincere or cruel, can’t gauge whether or not it matters.

“Listen,” the gatekeeper says. “For reasons I can’t begin to follow, you seem to have your mind made up to ride. Why not go buy yourself a ticket like everybody else so I don’t get in trouble with my boss?”

“But I don’t want to seat,” Waylan says. “That’s just, they got the basketing all wrong. It’s not about cycling, it’s about getting through.” He burrows an imaginary tunnel with his hand. “The old communication model with the arrow. No more noise in the signal. See?” Waylan tries demonstrating with his hands, but the gatekeeper just shakes his head.

“Mister, you are one strange son of a bitch, if you’ll pardon my saying so.”

“I only want to swim the vortex. Hell, you could scowl along well enough if you like.”

The gatekeeper cradles his jaw like it’s already sore from having so many of these discussions. “Look. I’ve had a long night. If I let you in, do you promise not to make trouble?”

Waylan lays on the smile.

“Good. Not too drunk to ride, are you?”

“No drop.”

“Yeah, sure. You puke up there and I’m gonna tell my boss you snuck in or threatened me, one. He’ll be telling the cops. That suit you just fine-o?”

“Brother that’s the deal,” Waylan says. He spears an arm forward and holds it there, hand set to shake-mode. The gatekeeper offers a wormy handshake and Waylan pushes through the tines, feels the gears ratchet against his shriveled belly, the Ferris wheel expanding violently as the lights file outward from the spindle in a perfect isobar. The spindle is where he needs to be. There at the core of the circle he’ll enter the world beyond the world.

He takes his seat in a gondola of cyan fiberglass and waits until a second attendant slams the door home and secures the latch, leaving behind a rich cigar reek. Maybe the wheel will spin

with such fantastic speed they'll be rifled to the moon after all. Who needs Belize? With a rattle of chains against gear teeth, the machine lurches to life. Waylan's gondola rocks weightlessly, begins swinging up over the park to a score of calliope music, Waylan laughing wildly at the improbability of a contraption such as this moon-lifter. A new urgency sends the breeze whistling through gaps in the gondola's metal parts.

Parkgoers below go about their light-hearted business, but Waylan feels cagey in his gondola, like he wants to expand. He craves great heights, but he also needs open spaces. He studies the perfect geometric distribution of carts above and below him. Each of the weathered gondolas is outfitted with a flat fiberglass top. He considers the marred interior of his own cart, its fittings well-rusted in the salty air. It'll be easier to break the latchhasps than the locking mechanism itself. He waits until his gondola approaches twelve o'clock on the wheel and then he lays on his back and kicks the door with all his strength, pressing until his thigh muscles feel like frayed rope. Fiberglass buckles. He kicks again, and the doorhinges warp. One more kick and the hasps fail. A gust of wind sucks the gondola door open with a low groan. Waylan's feet drop into space, so much wonderful space. Between his shoes, a line of thunderstorms closes on the coast some forty-seven miles below. To the north, the skies are clear and stars swell bulblike, they're so close at hand. The wheel's engineers must've made a wonderful miscalculation. He has been carried up past the clouds, past the atmosphere, to a place trafficked only by satellites. If he steps through the door, he'll drift like a helium balloon, which might be nice. Waylan holds his breath, the oxygen gone thin in these upper reaches. He figures he can hold it for a good ten minutes or so. Hell, he once swam the whole length of a swimming pool underwater.

Waylan backs out through the door. Even in the absence of gravity, he struggles to pull himself up onto the gondola's roof. The cart sways along, cradled in its suspension as he

scrambles to a crawling position. By now, his lungs burn so hotly and his heart hammers with such force that he takes off the canvas hat and begins drawing heavy breaths through the fabric. Waylan is pleased by his own ingenuity and his ability to respire empty space.

A brief explosion of light disrupts the cosmos. For a moment, he scans the heavens for whatever gas giant might have blown into or out of existence, but then the thunder rips through and gives him pause, thunderstorm racket somehow violating the sanctity of space. Is that possible? He glances down to the coastline, sees the waves beaten white under the approaching storm cells. The wind gains speed, scattering loose popcorn and litter along the boardwalk below, the gondolas rocking buoyantly on their mounts.

As the wheel's rotation brings him closer to the ground, Waylan presses himself hard against the fiberglass top, feels its polished surface cool against the raw skin of his cheek. It's very important that no one notices him yet. Even so, a few of the children point him out, and Waylan gives them the thumbs-up.

Then he's ascending again. As the gondola nears two o'clock, the machine squeals to a halt. The ride is already over, maybe on account of bad weather way down there on earth. He watches as three teenagers exit the lowermost gondola and walk to the gates. A cool wind sings down his shirt collar. He breathes through the hat for a while. As the wheel swings him up near the three o'clock position, he brings himself up to a crouch and sets about mentally charting a path to reach the wheel's axle through the tangle of struts and crosspieces. Complicated, like staring into the guts of a clock. By now people on the ground and on the wheel are watching. The older couple in the gondola above his ask just what in the practical fuck he thinks he's up to, and Waylan is astonished to discover that astrophysics has it wrong, that lack of atmosphere doesn't inhibit speech after all.



Someone on the ground yells up at him, but they're so far below that Waylan can't tell the words or who's calling to who. Satisfied with the gondola's stability, he begins crawling out onto the nearest of the wheel's spokes. On either side of him, the colored lights radiate out from the center of the wheel, sunrays rendered by a hack cartoonist. Someone calls Waylan's name—a man who might be Jefferson or an older version of Reeve. Something so vulnerable about this figure, mouth tight and urgent. From Waylan's great altitude, the man's sheer earnestness makes him seem youthful and naïve, and Waylan must suppress a bout of weeping. Another person with good intentions, and he'll go unrecognized. Like Sam, like Owen, like Avery Moss. Hell, like Prescott, even. Better just end it now and not give this guy a reason to hope for whatever it is he's hoping for.

“We're no brotherhood,” Waylan calls down. He crawls on, stopping now and then to breathe through the hat. Then deeper into the wheel's framework, crossing the struts and guy-wires, drawing closer to the spindle, which isn't much better in size than the axle of a large truck, and overlaid with a catwalk of wood planking. By now thunder barks along the park's perimeter, and the other riders call Waylan nasty names. He can hear children wailing, and a bunch of the others are shouting at Waylan to climb back to his gondola or shouting at the operators to spin them all down. Waylan didn't realize he was preventing people from reaching the ground. Don't they want to follow him to the spindle? Such a significant gateway as this, and it's graced with such a crappy catwalk. Still, he has to keep trying. He wills himself along, climbs free of the steel spokes and steps onto the catwalk, the air near the vortex so charged with ions that his skin crackles. Waylan flinches at the snarling thunder, and there's a fresh volley of hateful promises from the mouths of his fellow riders. Everyone is so scared of everything. Waylan waves to them

and motions for them to follow, but of course you can't help those who don't want to be helped.  
Rain falls, angling against the wind, the drops taking on color as they near the lights

The center, at last. He stands among the swaying shadows of the gondolas overhead. He draws a few final breaths through the hat. In the fogless world he'll be free to create and destroy as he sees fit. He can build his own ocean if he wants, his own island. Waylan takes a final drag through the hat. *One for the money. Two for the show. Three to get ready.*

He walks from one end of the catwalk to the other with deliberate steps, spinning circles as he goes, imagining himself swept into a coffee-tinted whirlpool. He walks the entire length of the catwalk.

## CHAPTER 45

Prescott and Owen stood waiting for orders, shovels in hand. Owen could hear the creek water murmuring over the rocks a few yards away. Prescott was sweating even more than usual. How much water did a guy like him have to drink to keep from drying out? Connie held the flashlight, its weak light sweeping between the three patches of disturbed ground. All three of them still wore their aprons, and though they all stank of squid and various other sealife, Owen had learned not to mind it, and it kind of bothered him that he didn't mind it. He'd become like those people who lived so close to a paper mill that the odor didn't even register. It'd been a long night turning out endless calamari burgers at Lafitte's, and truth be told, he sort of wished Waylan was still around to help. Not that he felt bad about Waylan getting fired—that was Waylan's problem. Only, Owen's arms were getting pretty sore from harvesting all those squid by himself.

Oh well. Here they were, digging in the ground just like they used to before Lafitte's. They'd already excavated the Jenkins brothers once, and then Waylan had stolen them from the museum and buried them again, and then, later—Owen still didn't really understand this—Waylan had excavated them all over again. Then, if Connie's theory was accurate, he'd buried them all over again. So you could say that what they were doing now was re-re-excavating the Jenkinses. How many more times before they could just stay freaking buried?

“There's no guarantee Waylan's behind this,” Prescott said.

Connie angled the light at his chest so that his face was partly illuminated. “That's some sharp detective work, Nels. Hell, it must be some other nutcase who likes to dig and bury down by the creek.”

Prescott's eyes were big and wet, like he still wanted to believe that Waylan couldn't be to blame. Owen didn't have much doubt that Waylan was guilty, although, could you really call him a thief? To do that would be to say that Connie owned the Jenkinses.

"Go on and dig," Connie said. She leveled the flashlight at the first patch of dirt.

They dug, shovels alternating, their blades plunging easily into the loose dirt. Prescott was digging unevenly, taking indiscreet scoops from both ends of the hole. Owen lifted his dirt from the center of the patch and continued excavating the same area until he felt the blade scrape against what wasn't dirt. He called for Connie's light as soon as he saw the first pale finger.

"You sure it's just the Jenkinses?" Prescott said. "You sure he's not killed Sam?"

Connie fixed Prescott in the light. "I think that kitchen steam's gotten to your brain. I'll bet you the restaurant that those are the fingers of Leroy Jenkins."

"I don't get it," Owen said. "Why would he put them back in the ground if no one's caught him?"

"The why of it doesn't make a lick of difference to me," Connie said. "Now go on and dig."

And at it they went. They'd re-excavate Leroy, whoever he was, and then the other two, and for what? So they could go back inside Connie's boring museum? Why couldn't they just stay here in the ground? That was where they belonged, just like Waylan said. Maybe there was a small measure of sense sunk alongside Waylan's craziness. Not the giant in the desert, though. That thing made no sense, and Owen wouldn't stand for it. But sure, he could admit to something feeling a little, well, wrong about digging up these three cowboy guys, who just wanted to stay buried. Weren't they supposed to be badass saloon fighters? Didn't they rob trains and run gold expeditions out west and stuff like that?

Owen shoveled more dirt. He could see Leroy's nose poking through the soil, but he still had to dig out around the shoulders and the legs. These guys probably deserved better than getting dug up like this and put back on display. Must've been some world they lived in. Harder times. People didn't even have electricity. The interiors of their homes were nothing but untreated lumber and soft yellow candleglow. Every town a fire hazard. Tough men, these Jenkinses. Probably lived off the land, had to clear their lots of rattlesnakes and scorpions. Had there been wolves around in their days? There were rattlesnakes next to the Jenkinses in Connie's museum, and she knew a lot about history.

Owen shoveled more dirt. The form of Leroy was getting sharper, the legs and shoulders outlined. He'd been fairly big, this guy. These brothers probably hadn't been so boring in real life. In real life, they were probably tough—even tougher than Owen's old man, who'd once lost most of his fingertip closing a big pipe valve and didn't even miss work to go see a doctor, just stitched it up himself on his lunch break. Probably the Jenkins brothers had gone on daring adventures and driven the pioneer women wild. Owen smiled and bent down to brush some dirt from Leroy's face. The face of a man who had some stories to tell.

Must've been some world they lived in.

## CHAPTER 46

Why no cosmic lightshow to herald his arrival to the alternate world? Why no flourish of trumpets? The Ferris wheel begins turning again, and that's all. Waylan looks down at the loading platform, sees three riders exit their gondola and spree for the exit gates. The two operators are having a screaming contest, all carnival behavior predicated on some form of aggression. One of them keeps pointing at Waylan, who doesn't feel much like screaming.

If it is a parallel reality Waylan now occupies, it feels way too familiar. In fact, it feels exactly the same. One of the operators shouts to get his attention. The other jumps on the controls and rotates another gondola into position for unloading. Didn't Waylan walk through the portal just like he was supposed to? He walks backward over the gangplank and still there's no change, and the whole point here is change.

Waylan inches to the end of the platform on his stomach and hangs his head down so he can inspect the enormous steel bushings that house the Ferris wheel's axle. Rain courses down the back of his neck. There's a circle of fluorescent lights down there and little else. He tries to shove his arm through the center and at least grope whatever improbable dimension it frames, but the metal feels hot, and won't give. He worms his way back onto the catwalk. There's nothing else up there, just a rustic ladder fashioned of rebar, rain-slick rungs leading down to the ground, which he'd rather avoid. He pitches onto his back.

He can hear people shouting instructions to him. A spire of lightning hooks down from the belly of a storm cloud and terminates somewhere over the Gulf, electrocuting a good many fish and probably whole constellations of those phosphorescent microbes.

He's very tired. It'd be really nice to just stretch out across the axle and close his eyes and make it all disappear. Something scampers over the boards and he sits up to find the same

monkey—at least it looks like the same one—he chased over the dunes. It holds a white paper baggie containing what seems like an endless supply of roasted peanuts. Waylan takes one and cracks the husk open between his teeth. Good and salty. Every now and then a raindrop strikes the monkey’s fur, and it jerks like a startled cat.

“We’re not really in space, are we?” Waylan says.

If the monkey is dissatisfied with this possibility, its frenetic eyes tell no such story. Do monkeys know about despair? Well, this one doesn’t. It sports the coked-up eyes of a hyperactive child. Too many colorful pills, too many synchronized lights. A final clap of thunder drives the little animal off the plank and down the wheel’s architecture on fleet limbs, one paw still clutching the bag of peanuts.

A chilly summer’s-over kind of wind whistles among the struts and spokes. Most of the spectators are filing off to the parking lot to find their cars, or else they’re ducking under umbrellas or the thin tarp roofs of gaming booths. A few upturned faces remain to call Waylan down, but he’s not coming down. He doesn’t see Sam, but Jefferson stands down there holding an umbrella. Such a stupid man, but there he is, hopeful to the final hour. Beside him, but a good distance removed stand Azar’s self-proclaimed freaks, a motley arrangement with the purple Squid Man, the dwarf, and beside him, a slovenly sort who must be Milo the Clown without his makeup on. Milo is flanked by the jester, who, with his sharp features and his garish costume reminds Waylan of a well-tailored goblin. The jester carries a pail of tomatoes, and Waylan doesn’t want to think about what he’ll do with them.

Between the lot of them, Azar’s freaks share three large umbrellas with clear plastic tops. Bondy stands at the front of their ranks in a shirt with three sleeves, though she has left the third arm somewhere else and doesn’t seem very freakish without it. Most of them smoke cigarettes,

all of which, by way of some dexterity unique to smokers, remain lit in the rain. They're all down there. Even Owen makes an elegant bow and whistles to have the crowd's attention. He removes a pair of sunglasses, revealing an eye battered black and swollen shut.

“And Waylan could've stepped in sooner,” they all chant. “Could've stepped in, should've stepped in, did not step in.”

Nels Prescott wears his pirate's satire, and incites the crowd to chastise Waylan, saying he's just damn disappointed. Sam appears nude beside him, her face polished limestone ringed with two great loops of mascara, deflated breasts melting over a glistening belly so gravid that however well she cradles it, it swings inches mere inches from the ground, the life inside palpating, clawing. What's leavening inside her belly is no one's fault but Waylan's—he who will live to see his life and Sam's ruined by their own flesh and blood, Waylan's bad chemicals now replicating to produce a being of such startling and rarefied wrong-mindedness that he or she will soon work the town itself off its own bedrock and impose a heaviness so total, so lung-crushing, that East Texas will sink into the Gulf. Waylan groans. Connie drapes a sympathetic arm over Sam's shoulders and calls him a no-good goddamn liar. Then she points up at Waylan, starts chanting the word *graverobber*. Others join in.

Waylan's father rolls into view in front of the enraged crowd, legs and upper torso angling from the jaws of a recliner that's slowly ingesting him. He wears corduroy slippers, and this detail in particular distresses Waylan for reasons he doesn't really understand, though part of him is still just kind of grateful to see that his father has left the house. Loose pills trickle from the chair's broken upholstery in little multicolored cataracts. Then Dad turns red and starts blubbering nonsense. He takes up Prescott's mantra, saying he's just damn disappointed. They're all down there, and now they're giving off that awful chrome radiation, skewers of it extending



from their mouths and traveling a long way, nearly reaching Waylan, who scoots back into the wheel's architecture.

He's pretty sure he'd like to just jump at this point and be done with it, but then a visible tremor passes under the crowd's feet, cleaving the ground. A single hand appears through the fault and begins groping tenderly, like it's saying hello. Three children who might be Sioux—he should've paid more attention at Connie's museum—unearth themselves. Apparently unaware of the rain, they stand close together in leggings of hide, shirts and dresses marked with beautiful geometric patterns. They take weary glances at the crowd. Are they crying? Waylan smiles. They seem like such nice children, but they steal fey glances at the broken ground, which begins rumbling. Waylan's hate-mob steps back. They've probably seen enough movies to know that it's mostly bad news that springs from the ground.

A single hoof emerges from the fault and paws at the air, almost tenderly. Waylan has a bad feeling about that hoof. One after another, three horses issue up from the fissure, Jenkinses mounted on their backs. The brothers begin cussing and yelling and firing off their pistols at the fleeing Sioux children even before the ground has fully yielded them up. The gunplay inspires jostling among the crowd, and the ranks mill and break again to reveal a squad of dark-bearded men riding small horses. They're from a different era than the Jenkinses, dressed in camisas and doublets, their heads topped with crested helmets, some tarnished and cracked, others ornate and feather-plumed, each of them and their horses adorned in garish pendants and bracelets of gold. They call to one another in staccato bursts, eyes red, mouths wide with an overwhelming rapacity, bare hands black with blood. Whose blood?

The horses founder under their terrible gold weight as they raise their rapiers, saluting Waylan, calling to him in what sounds like pidgin Spanish. One of them flies a flag from his

lance, a red square with the Virgin at its center. She is framed by a gold border, and a golden crown tops her beatific head. Waylan holds his hands out, like that might force the riders back into the ground. His head sinks to his knees. He has done this, has lifted the horsemen back into existence along with the Jenkinses.

Now he hears singing. A deep-toned dirge, the cadence slow and heavy as a freighter. He doesn't want to see what's coming, but he has to. He has to know.

A long line of lank bodies march toward the Ferris wheel, their legs and wrists chained together, the men shirtless and glistening in the rain, the women hobbled. Their backs are scarred, their spines tortuous. A dozen rain-shining faces turn to see Waylan, a profound sadness in their eyes.

Human slaves.

"Stop it," Waylan calls, "Put them all back." He glares upon the entire rueful congregation. Pinched little faces huddled together under the rain-softened carnival lights. He tries to blink them away.

When he finally gets the nerve to open his eyes, most of the crowd has disappeared and it's Myles who captures his attention. The kid is posted on his knees beside the gates of the Ferris wheel, clothes pasted to his skin. He leers at Waylan, hands pressing the sky. Clouds boil overhead, their dark bellies hung with diverticular lumps. Thunder sings constantly now, and it occurs to Waylan that Myles might be coaxing it, poking and prodding at the clouds like a doctor working on a constipated patient. Myles clearly wants to summon up a killstroke to rid the town of the last Dranger, save the bedridden father.

"Save the bedridden father," Waylan says.

So this is his final reward. He has long suspected that if Reeve really is dead, the lightning is what killed him, and the thought of dying likewise has its appeal. A pattern of tragedy is a pattern, at least. But how will the worm in his head survive? Maybe in designing Waylan's destruction it has sealed its own fate as well. Or maybe it already wiggled free through his ear undetected, and now hunts for another mind to occupy.

"This about Sam?" Waylan asks Myles.

Myles averts his eyes, keeps shaping. He's giving off all kinds of bad radiation.

"You know she left?" Waylan says. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm not coming down. Not just yet."

"For Christ's sake, Waylan." It's Bondy, having removed her cigarette long enough to shout at him, glassy spokes extending from her mouth. "Has it come to this?"

"Looks like we got a jumper!" Milo the Clown says. He's even uglier without his makeup.

"I'd aim for one of the deeper puddles if I was you, mister." That's the jester at Milo's side. He bounces a tomato in his palm like a rosin bag.

Ignoring the three freaks, Waylan aims a finger at Myles. "Make it good and clean. I'd just as soon be struck to dust than have to climb down only half-dead, never mention having to hear those goddamn clowns laugh about it."

Myles keeps gesturing, and if anything, the thunder and the wind have abated. Waylan sits with his legs crossed and his palms upturned, trying to feel enlightened, waiting to drop out of existence in a cloud of steam and ashes and maybe a brief whiff of ozone.

The next bolt ratchets down at over the Gulf in an exaggerated arc, like it's offset by the wind. For a moment, the light's intensity makes the structure of a distant oil platform visible, then the whole construct darkens. The thunder takes several heartbeats to reach them.

"Quit stalling," Waylan calls.

As Myles continues his senseless gesturing, he stares at Waylan like there's some point here that he's missing. The rain is thinning now. Myles's flanks heave over his laddered ribs, the shirt transparent with rain. One eye roams freely in its socket, angling from sky to ground, measuring, though Waylan isn't sure what. Finally, he slouches forward and lies still. Thunder gongs to the north, the sound of it watery with distance, like he's hearing it through a length of pipe. Myles looks all senseless and palsied, a little man expired during some revivalist form of prayer.

"Waylan come down," Waylan whispers, running his finger along a rain-slick ladder rung. He knows it's coming. He just knows it.

"Waylan come down." Bondy and Jefferson shout it together.

What argument is there to make? The pills are wearing off. The Ferris wheel is just a Ferris wheel. The lightning won't spike him, and worse yet, he might be a father.

## CHAPTER 47

The storms had passed on into darkness, and the station wagon was almost out of gas. Sam wasn't going to stop, though, especially not with Balthazar in the back seat. She'd found him at the house, where Waylan had left the front door open and the yard circled with bowls of ant-ruined dog chow. Zar was okay, but there was no way she'd leave him there long-term. He could live with her, at her parents' house. She'd skipped work today, and though she'd always supposed it would feel unnatural to watch lunch time roll around without having set foot in The Center, she'd never felt more at ease.

Wind hummed over the station wagon's hood, audible over the noodling of a smooth jazz trio she'd picked up on the radio. She kept hoping the meter might wander, might buck loose, but the instruments stayed in time, making her sleepy. She was hungry, too, and what she really wanted was a calamari burger from Lafitte's. She had a feeling that Zar might want one, too. She really didn't give a damn whether Nels Prescott saw her or not. All that awkwardness could stay between him and Waylan.

She'd watched from a distance as he climbed down from the Ferris wheel. By the time Bondy called to notify her, Waylan was almost at the middle of the wheel, which is where he was when she got to the boardwalk. She maintained what she thought was a respectable distance. Sam wanted to make sure the boardwalk routine wasn't some kind of stunt on Waylan's part to guilt her back into his life.

But it wasn't that, at least she didn't think so. He hadn't demanded to see her, hadn't threatened to kill himself. Maybe he had some kind of a breakthrough up there. When he finally climbed down, his eyes didn't linger on the sky the way they so often did. He reminded her of the old Waylan again.

She wondered if Jefferson had made it back to his place yet. Maybe after Lafitte's she'd swing by and bring him a burger. He was a decent enough guy, though she had no further desire to sleep with him. What she liked most was how he didn't need her, didn't cloy, didn't insist. Was it selflessness that led her to this moment? So what if it was? Between Waylan and various others, it would've been just a matter of time before Gaston's thousand thorns bled her dry. Okay, maybe not quite a thousand, but enough for her to be sure she had little left to give Waylan or Bondy, or maybe even her patients.

Ahead, she could see the lights of the Lafitte's marquee, its familiar scripted letters. Balthazar whined from the back seat, probably detecting delicious traces in the air and hoping against all doggy hope. A powerful thing, the unconditional optimism that drove a dog to the open door of a car time and time again. If we could hope the way dogs hope. If we could do that.

Sam wasn't going to make any rash decisions. Maybe she would take the baby to term, but she'd suffer no further obligations.

## CHAPTER 48

They sat Waylan down with his back pressed against the far wall of the jester's booth and covered him with a blanket that stank of fresh tennis balls. The floor was speckled with little dried-up tomato seeds. He didn't see any more of that metallic radiation, but every now and then a monkey would scamper through and try to grab something shiny—cuffs, firearms—off a cop's utility belt. It was still raining, and the police were gathered inside the booth with Waylan, wearing their plastic-wrapped hats. They stamped their feet and scratched their brows as they puzzled over their ledgers, glancing sidelong at Waylan like he might know the answers. One of them asked Waylan if he knew how to spell *disoriented* and then jotted down the letters as Waylan recited them. Otherwise, Waylan kept to himself. He'd decided there was a better chance he'd be left alone if he just kept saying that this had all been some terrible misunderstanding. He certainly wasn't going to mention the stolen monkeys.

The Squid Man and the jester stood with their backs to the wall, just a few feet from him. He listened while they discussed life on the midway. The jester doffed his belled cap, and his face appeared softer without it. Almost human, actually. He carried a dark red tomato, which he kept polishing against his jester's vest like he hoped to meet his own reflection in the skin. His dark hair was starting to gray over the ears, and with the tomato pulp wiped from his face, he projected a kind of distinguished cynicism. He complained to the Squid Man about his eyes and spoke about dramatic variances in tomato acidity. Said Dr. Jable had prescribed him special eye drops. Waylan wasn't going to mention that he knew her, too. That'd be unprofessional.

“*Solanum lycopersicum*,” the jester said, balancing the fruit on the end of a long finger. “They weren't cultivated in Europe until the late sixteenth century. Folks thought they were poisonous for the longest time.”

The Squid Man's eyebrows bunched up.

"Tomatoes, I mean. All those period movies that show mobs of people throwing tomatoes in medieval England? They're all bogus."

"Oh."

"A man has to understand his element, see?"

The Squid Man pursed his lips. "Well why not just work the sideshow with us like I been saying? We could start you off with something easy. Bed-of-nails type stuff. Save your eyes, at least."

"Right," the jester said.

"Get someone else to stand there getting blasted with tomatoes."

"Sure."

"What, then?"

"Only, I'd miss it."

"You'd miss getting hit with tomatoes?"

The jester's face bowed up into a sneer. He began explaining something, but then shook his head.

"Or maybe you'd miss talking shit to all those marks."

The jester showed a guilty smile.

"You're a goddamn strange one, Allan," the Squid Man said.

The jester pumped his eyebrows. He studied the Squid Man's piercings, the snarling ink-rendered demons sprawling across his arms and neck. "Well I guess we're all pretty strange," the jester said, swiveling his head to where Waylan was sitting.



There was something about that jester that Waylan felt like he understood, even if he couldn't name what it was. He liked watching the two men interact. He even gave a thumbs-up to the jester, who replaced his cap and narrowed his eyes at Waylan.

"Told you I'd see you around," he said. His hands closed over the tomato and he cocked his arm back like he'd hurl it at Waylan, who readied himself to block it. The jester's throwing arm relaxed. With a flick of the wrist, he lobbed the tomato easily and Waylan caught it up in the hem of the blanket. The jester walked to the front of the booth and began sorting through the tomato baskets, picking out the overripe pieces, or the ones that just weren't up to his peculiar standards.

Waylan rolled the tomato with his fingers, his bleary reflection tracking over the glossy skin. Never a straight line. The Squid Man stood watching for quite a while before he stepped over to where Waylan was sitting. He eased down to a squatting position, to show that Waylan could talk to him, that he and Waylan were more or less on the same level. Waylan bunched the blanket up around his mouth in an effort to keep potentially incriminating words from falling out. Even so, he was mesmerized by the endless assortment of imps and ghouls adorning the man's purpled skin. The creatures themselves were neatly contained, none of them threatening to wiggle free. Waylan liked that.

"What were you protesting?" the Squid Man said.

"What's that?" Waylan said. He'd heard the guy. He was just hoping he might elaborate the second time.

"Was it nuclear power? You trying to save the rainforest or what?"

"I think this has all been some terrible misunderstanding," he said, trying his best to sound level-headed.

“They all think you were scared of the storm. Said you panicked and broke out of your cart and got all tangled up in the wheel by accident.”

“They did say that, didn’t they?”

“But I know better. Looked like you were up there protesting something.”

“A misunderstanding,” Waylan said.

“My name’s Danny, by the way,” the Squid Man said, offering a shakeable purple hand.

“I see you around sometimes. Saw you out there catching squid a couple times.”

“I’m Waylan,” Waylan said. He shook the purple hand, which felt pretty much the same as all the other hands he’d ever shaken.

“I was there a few months back when your buddy got punched and you took the umbrella to the back of that big guy’s head. We all speculated to no end, but I wouldn’t mind hearing the truth about what started it. You might even help me settle a bet or two.”

“Misunderstanding. All one big misunderstanding.”

The Squid Man revealed the pikes of his teeth. “Keep saying that if you like. These shit-heel cops might actually buy it, even if I don’t.”

“Anyway, I’m finished with all that.”

“Well I also wanted to tell you I like that sand man thing you made out on the flats. I don’t know what the hell it’s supposed to be, but it looks cool.”

“Thanks. I like your tattoos. I like the way your monsters stay put.”

“Listen. You come by one day when you’re ready to tell us all what you were up there protesting. We’d like to hear about it.” He clapped a hand on Waylan’s shoulder and stood up.

“Maybe I will.”

The police officers were finishing the first stage of their reports, reading selections aloud, seeing who'd concur. They postured like scholars, trying alternate words, new phrasings. One clean-shaven officer, a rookie, maybe, had brought them all a sack of calamari burgers, and they all appeared anxious to finish up the paperwork and eat.

"Believe we've settled on *disoriented*," one of them told Waylan.

"Disoriented," Waylan said.

"That's okay with you, then, Mr. Dranger?"

"Fine with me."

Waylan traced the tomato's cool, smooth skin. It occurred to him that he was sweating, so he unshouldered the blanket, leaving it twisted at his side. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten anything other than gnat-specked bread, Giles's mushrooms, and the monkey's peanut. With crossed legs, he sat there eating the tomato like it was an apple, thumb and forefinger splayed toward opposite poles.

Myles and Jefferson walked past the jester's booth, Myles carrying a cotton candy that was liquefying in the humidity, his mouth painted with pink protoplasm. So many people deserved apologies. Better start a list, put Myles at the top. Maybe he'd see if he could get the little guy interested in painting. There was damage control to consider on account of Jefferson, too, what with the highway fiasco. Then there was Sam. He didn't look forward to those discussions. If he could just get to a point where she didn't loathe him, well, that'd be enough for now. But hey, she might loathe him anyway. Didn't matter. Important thing was to apologize in the first place.

Should he apologize to Bondy? Better not get carried away with promises he wouldn't keep. Same went for Connie. He'd given up the Jenkinses and restored them to their rightful place, and despite his recent falling out with the brothers, he still hated the idea of her museum.

He was enjoying himself there on the floor of the gaming booth. He'd made up his mind to apologize, and there were no more crusaders or conquistadors surging up out of the ground, no Jenkins brothers calling out for violence or debauchery. Almost felt like they'd all loped off to harangue the next victim. Maybe they kept a schedule. Wait, that was paranoid, wasn't it?—to think that the universe's equations somehow leaned in opposition to anyone's will. But hadn't he believed that? Where were the bad thoughts now, or the worm's voice, ever ready to pour the next absurd conspiracy into his gullible ear?

Maybe the worm really had escaped while he was still up there on the wheel, the coward. Damn the worm. Damn the worm and its bogus conspiracies. Damn the Jenkinses, too. Damn Half Moon Caye and damn the Old West and damn all the ghosts. There was no escaping Gaston Beach, but neither was it a prison.

“There are no eyes on you,” Waylan said. “No one watches.”

There was no counter-voice to gainsay him this time. Maybe at the wheel's core he really had passed into an alternate reality, one where the mind-worms were eliminated. Reeve was probably still gone in this world, too, and that was regrettable. Or was it?

Even if were possible, would Waylan really want him to come back? What kind of new nightmare would that be?—trying to catch up, trying to know each other all over again. Maybe it really was best that the dead stayed dead.

He'd nearly finished eating the tomato, and then there it was—the worm—peering out from the perfect little channel it had bored into the fruit. So it had escaped, probably just as

Waylan crossed the threshold of the Ferris wheel. The creature had taken refuge in this unassuming piece of produce, never even dreaming that Waylan would find it like this, exposed and hostless. Little bastard sure looked surprised.

Its fat body was that same fecund shade of green that graced the shit piles of ill cows set out to pasture. A peristaltic ripple of motion down the length of its vulgar body, green-striped tube fattened on so much gray matter that Waylan could never win back. So what was its plan? Was it gathering strength, going into hiding before the opportune moment came to burrow back into Waylan's ear canal? Was this the beginning of its chrysalis phase, and upon transforming, would it go after Sam next? Jefferson? Myles? Owen? Unacceptable. He didn't want any of them suffering what he'd suffered. Not even Connie.

Waylan would finish the worm. He brought his face close to the tomato. He wanted the worm to recognize him, wanted it to know the engine of its undoing, just as he had. And sure enough, the worm glared at Waylan and worked its cruel little jaws.

He took its unsightly knob of a head between his front teeth and pulled, plucking it from its burrow, its body whipping obscenely, lengthier than he'd expected. Without using his hands—he didn't want to touch it—he lip-shimmied its entire body into his mouth, chewing slowly, thoroughly. He almost thought he could hear the worm screaming, and that made him cry because for so long he and the worm had shared the same headspace, and even though it tried so hard to destroy him, and even though Waylan was going to destroy it, he still sort of loved the worm. They'd been through so much.

The Squid Man and the jester had watched as Waylan chewed. "This guy might put us both out of a job," the Squid Man told the jester.

Waylan smiled at them, but he kept chewing, kept crying. He liked Danny the Squid Man. He even liked Allan the hellish jester, who'd somehow known to give him the worm-loaded tomato. What were the odds of that? The right worm in the right tomato. Would you call it luck? Incredible, in any case, that something like that could work out in Waylan's favor. Maybe he'd even take Danny up on his offer to hang out. He'd always liked the boardwalk, he and Reeve. What would be the harm in stopping by, shooting the shit with a few of the freaks? They were decent people.

There was an unpleasant meatiness to this worm in his mouth. Like trying to eat a tiny bodybuilder. He chewed on, the skin working up a froth of mucus inside his mouth. He tasted the iron of its blood, and something foul and soily coated the back of his tongue. Didn't matter. He'd chew the worm down to individual molecules before he stopped, would chew until his jaws gave out. In a strange way, death was what he owed the worm. The creature had tried to destroy Waylan, but he was stronger than it knew. He would survive.

## CHAPTER 49

The sun still hadn't broken over the water, but its ambient light showed a dark line of what might mature into stormy weather. Sometimes it was like this, the weather spoken in advance by the simple motion of a skiff—the bob and sway, bob and sway. Their final fishing trip, and of course Waylan and Reeve had caught nothing, not even squid. With help from Prescott and Connie, Owen had fished down the squid to the point where folks could even go swimming like they used to.

“What next?” Reeve said, twisting water out of his shirt. He wasn't drinking today, and the lack of squid seemed to have him in a better mood.

“Prescott cut me a pretty sporty check,” Waylan said. “Figure I might head west, maybe drive up California One a little ways.”

“As much money as you've made for that place.”

“The man plays fair,” Waylan said, wishing he'd noticed it sooner.

“Still kind of goofy, though.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And what about Sam?” Reeve said. He recrossed his legs, like holding onto the question for so long had made him jittery.

“We're supposed to meet at The Salty Bean tomorrow.”

“You figure she'll want to move back in?”

Waylan shook his head. “I think we're past all of that.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Reeve said, his voice compressed. There was so little room for his fishing analogies or snarky rejoinders in today's conversation.

“But that's not what I came to tell you,” Waylan said.

“So this is it, right?” Reeve tapped the deck with his wet feet. He bowed his head, like he was crying and didn’t want Waylan to see.

“Doctor’s orders,” Waylan said.

“I understand,” Reeve said, head sinking closer to his lap.

“We should’ve done this sooner.”

“Well,” Reeve said, blowing seawater from his nose, feet tapping.

“Little wonder that we argued so damn much,” Waylan said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Reeve wiped his nose.

“Somehow that was more comfortable.”

Reeve laughed, and for a moment his voice lost its nails. However briefly, he sounded boyish, like the old Reeve.

“Listen,” Waylan said. “I should’ve paid attention to that weather report. I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Reeve said. “I got reckless out there, didn’t I?” He seemed to be searching for something over Waylan’s shoulder—a boat that he recognized, or a pod of dolphins.

“We’ll probably never know,” Waylan said.

“But I just have to say one thing,” Reeve said, working up a sour grin. “Goddamn, that must’ve been one bitching-ass storm that finally did me in.”

Waylan shook his head and let the laughter come. For a few minutes they watched the sun revive itself in the east, revealing heavy cloud scoops. Waylan and Reeve guessed at their shapes, each play more implausible than the last.

“That one’s just about the spitting image of Chevy Chase,” Reeve said.



“I was thinking Genghis Khan,” Waylan said.

When the game had run its course, Waylan shipped the oars and started rowing them back toward the marina. Reeve occupied himself by wringing the water from his clothes and singing the wrong lyrics to an old Bobby Darin song, one of Waylan’s favorites.

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By the time Waylan docked the skiff, Reeve’s seat was vacant again, and he realized he’d always been sort of relieved to see him gone. For the first time, Reeve hadn’t blundered overboard in a burst of profanity. He hadn’t exactly disappeared, either, at least not at first. He simply lost definition, became a pale cloud. The cloud became a haze over the boat, and before long the breeze carried the haze east, where it joined other clouds. Waylan wiped his eyes, not really caring if the fisherman had heard him talking to Reeve, or if they’d seen him cry.

For now, he had only the barest schematic of a plan, and it didn’t involve any hare-brained boat trips to Caribbean islands or big-name cities. He didn’t care about any of that. Mainly, he just wanted to drive America’s back highways and see what was there. An entire country, and he’d seen so little of it. So he’d drive north, and then he’d head either east or more likely west, though not to chase after phantom cowboys. Maybe he’d invite Jefferson or Myles to ride north along the coast of California, with its crimped edges, those blue-fogged valleys where the best grapes grew.

He tied up the beaten skiff and tucked the oars neatly under the benches. He climbed onto the dock and studied the curvature of the skiff’s bow, the deck where he’d landed so many squid. This was how he wanted to remember it, the crappy little tub he’d used to save Lafitte’s. To *help* save Lafitte’s, rather. If boats could tell stories, you’d never get this one to shut up. Well, time to let her go tell stories to someone else.

Waylan untied the bowline and pushed with his foot until the skiff nosed out into the sound. He sat for a long time, just watching the skiff drift east into flat-angled light. The little boat looked odd with no crew. Some of the fishermen watched, clearly wanting to ask, but not asking.

A cool autumn wind spun the boat around so that it started heading south, like it would head through the pass and out into the Gulf. The clouds were driving westward, Gaston-bound, towed by winds that came squalling over the docks, dragging a matte finish over the water and raising swells. The wind mussed the hair and the clothes of Waylan and the fisherman, but they braced themselves. They kept standing.

## CHAPTER 50

Waylan's giant stands over the flats on the east side of the creek. It's deaf to the wind that whistles through the thin desert grasses and steals over the blood rocks. From long distances, the giant's posture fools the onlooker's eye. It lumbers slowly across the flats, but of course that's impossible. The giant is inanimate. Like all structures, it wants to lie flat, return to the ground.

From a mid-field vantage, an onlooker might imagine that the giant has emerged imperfectly from the ground, that its legs have not fully cleared the earth that gives it form, a man-shaped mineral deposit still heaving itself from the bedrock.

From the near-field vantage, the giant has trapped its foot by accident, and its slow disintegration becomes more apparent. The high sun crazes its skin into a delicate puzzle, a hot wind pulling away loose dust so that its skin smolders. Sections of its wire skeleton and metal coupling show all over, and anyone who stands in the giant's shadow is showered with dust and sand and scales of dried mud. The constant hiss of disintegration.

Admirers stand underneath, snapping pictures, trading stories and rumors, but the giant is slowly collapsing. When it leans, they buttress it with lengths of lumber. Where the giant's skin wears away, the admirers spread fresh mud, but always the giant decays faster than they can work. People talk about stripping the skeleton down and reskinning it with concrete, but the giant stands a good distance from the creek, and concrete is expensive, and hard to carry. Concrete is hard to carry, and there's always a new marvel to consider.

Myles has built a tiny mud citadel out on the flats, its perimeter marked with a crenelated guard wall covering an area of about half a tennis court. Little curving roads of mud, knee and waist-high mud spires perforated with perfect ogive windows, tight-clustered mud pueblos enciled with sharp-cut staircases that might be fit for mice's feet. At the center of the town,

Myles has sculpted an impression of Sam's mouth, complete with perfect teeth, the lips impressed with mysterious runes. She has already seen the little citadel and its totem, and though she scratched her nose and mouthed a mint when she studied Myles's sculpture, it never occurred to her or anyone but him that she was the inspiration for its design.

"Is it some kind of storm drain?" she said, much to Myles's disappointment.

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The next hard rains strip away most of the skin on Waylan's giant, returning it to the semi-desert for the wind to scatter, but Myles's little village survives for a while, drawing the crowds that once stood by the giant. They take pictures, and they ask Myles many of the same questions they once asked Waylan. The psychedelic pilgrims and the tourists turn away from the giant's ruin, like they'd rather not be reminded.

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Children race clattering bicycles over the flats to see the giant's wiry skeleton, their faces covered with bandanas, their back tires unreeling long plumes of dust. They scale the giant's metal bonework, rust staining the palms of their hands.

With a groan of tortured metal, the giant finally lists over. Its rust stains the desert in crimson pools. These final remains will be scattered by the wind, the rain.

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