

6-25-2010

Blood Heist

Dan Darling

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_etds

Recommended Citation

Darling, Dan. "Blood Heist." (2010). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_etds/50

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature ETDs by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Daniel Darling
Candidate

English / Creative Writing
Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Daniel Mueller, Chairperson

J. Curran JESSE ALEMÁN

Delia

John

BLOOD HEIST

BY

DAN DARLING

BA, English, College of Wooster, 1999

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2010

by

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Blood Heist

Dan Darling

BS, English, College of Wooster, 1999

Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, University of New Mexico 2010

Abstract

A novel of fiction. John Stick, along with his two best friends, Spartacus Rex and Leon Flowers, rob a blood bank with the intent to sell the blood in Mexico. On the way, the ice cream truck that they have converted to transport the blood breaks down, and they become stranded in the desert. Stick notices that one of the bags of blood belongs to his ex-girlfriend, Cryopathria Rex, with whom he is still in love. Stick tries to take the blood back to Albuquerque out of guilt. Rex and Flowers stop him. The three men have an escalating feud, which leads to Flowers and Rex tying Stick to a tree and soaking him with several bags of blood and leaving him to die. Flowers and Rex ride south on a team of ostriches that Flowers has stolen from Crazy Patti LeBeau. Stick is rescued by a woman from Mexico named Alma. Together they pursue Flowers and Rex. On the way they encounter an alpaca farm, an Apache policeman named Chuck, the chupacabras, a vengeful Patti LeBeau, before they finally confront Rex in the Rio Grande gorge on the border of Texas and Mexico.

The novel explores themes of masculinity, trauma, betrayal, friendship, and the American-Mexican border. It is constructed with particular attention to character construction and imagery. It fits into the broad category of Post-Western literature.

Table of Contents

Preface: Synthesist Writing	iv
-----------------------------------	----

Blood Heist

Chapter 1: The Giant	1
Chapter 2: The Brine Shrimp	4
Chapter 3: The Scrapyard Dream	12
Chapter 4: How to Catch a Brown Recluse	20
Chapter 5: Cry	29
Chapter 6: The Ostrich Rider	52
Chapter 7: Positive Energy	66
Chapter 8: The Blackjack Chicken	78
Chapter 9: Broken Promises	90
Chapter 10: The Fire	102
Chapter 11: The Cottonwood Tree	111
Chapter 12: Trapped	116
Chapter 13: Alma and the Tandem Bike Pilgrimage	125
Chapter 14: Mescaline Popsicles and the <i>Chupacabras</i>	143
Chapter 15: Marika	165
Chapter 16: The Internet Van	171
Chapter 17: The Blood Heist	182
Chapter 18: Flowers	195
Chapter 19: The Flood	202
Chapter 20: Uncle John	213

Synthesist Writing:
An Assessment of Contemporary Literary Production

Since the turn of the new millennium arguments in the world of art, philosophy, and literature have surfaced across the Western world claiming that the postmodern era has passed. According to a wide range of thinkers, the days of literary production utilizing irony, relativism, and deconstruction to destabilize the grand Western narrative of history are over. Concurrent with declarations of the “end” of the literary movement that characterized American literature since World War II is a scramble across fields of academia, literature, and art to name the new trend. So far these names include late-postmodernism, post-postmodernism, reconstructivism, performatism, pseudo-modernism, remodernism, alter-modernism, pragmatism, critical realism, neo-realism, new-sincerity, stuckism, minimalism, maximalism, image-fiction, and hybrid fiction—none of which has yet taken predominant hold.

While the names vary, examination of the various schools of thought behind them reveals common trends in their description of current artistic and literary production. To the end of deciphering these trends, this preface is a survey of surveys: it contains findings from several books that have amalgamated fiction, criticism, and theory into whole studies of “post-postmodern” writing; it utilizes critical articles that focus on a particular writer, movement, or trend; it also paraphrases a welter of chatter from the web, gathered from theorists, critics, anonymously authored online encyclopedias, radical artistic groups, museum curators, and bloggers. Though I am not particularly qualified as an expert of post-postmodern literary

production, I have managed through these sources to get a strong sense of contemporary discourse on this issue. My goal is not necessarily to weigh in on who is right and who is wrong—indeed, contemporary writing is so diverse that those terms do not apply—but rather to identify overall trends and extrapolate the demands they make on literary craft that I may apply to my own work. To add further dimension to my survey of post-postmodern theories, I will discuss the work of four novelists—E. Annie Proulx, Salman Rushdie, Cormac McCarthy, and Luis Alberto Urrea—who have been dubbed post-postmodern, and juxtapose their work with one of the most often cited postmodernists: Thomas Pynchon. Finally, to add further theoretical context I will apply the theories of Jean-Francoise Lyotard, Immanuel Kant, and Italo Calvino, as they pertain to the craft of fiction.

My study focuses attention on two particular craft elements: image and character. Image has come to the forefront of literary craft primarily due to materialist causes. Over the past half century, with the rise of television and film, Western culture has become increasingly permeated with visual imagery. In the past twenty years our transformation into an image-laden culture has accelerated logarithmically: television has become even more entrenched and pervasive, while computers and the internet have exploded into a virtually infinite image-based alternate reality. This is not a negative trend. In fact, it allows the contemporary writer a unique opportunity to connect with a readership trained in reading visual rhetoric through vivid, apt, and unique images.

Our transition from postmodern to post-postmodern culture is also rooted in a surge in focus on the individual in literature. Postmodern fiction's agenda is often to highlight the unreliability of a singular narrative, implying that the perspective of a single individual—

especially a power-holding individual—is imperfect and relative; thus, often postmodern writers create conflict between individuals representative of different groups. Pynchon, for example, was less interested in resolving the internal conflict of *Gravity's Rainbow's* Slothrop than he was in tracing the complex network of conflict between colonized and colonizer, powerful and powerless. The focus was, thus, not on the individual, but on identity groups.

Our culture has experienced a surge in individualism in the past twenty years, fueled in large part materially. Just as the internet has created a culture accustomed to image-based communication, it has also created a culture wherein the “reader” has unprecedented power in cultural production. Not only does the reader participate in the creation of commercial texts—such as call-in television shows—but the reader can also create texts expressive of herself as an individual—e.g. Facebook profiles—and distribute them globally via the internet. To connect with such a reader, who arguably is encouraged to individuate herself more now than during many other periods in history, obviating traditional identity groups, a writer must locate the conflict of story internally within a character. This implies not only a shift in the locus of conflict, but the creation of a rich character who seems as complex as a real person, with a point of view close to that character’s consciousness—and thus a departure from the radicalized omniscience of Pynchon-esque postmodernists. In this way post-postmodern writing is a return to Modernism, with its exploration of the individual psyche; it is no coincidence that many of the attempts to name post-postmodernism imply a return to that era.

The remainder of this essay will focus on post-postmodernist fiction that draws strength from a conjunction of image and character. The first section will utilize Proulx and Rushdie to illustrate the use of imagery to structure narrative and craft characters; the latter half will address

point of view and ethnic relativism in the works of McCarthy and Urrea as manifestations of New Western literature. I have chosen these particular authors because of the influence they have had on my own writing; also, since my novel is a work of New Western literature, I've included craft-focused discussions of that genre.

“Post-postmodernism” is an unwieldy—and farcically idiosyncratic—term. Though the purpose of my study was not to develop my own definition and nomenclature for contemporary literature, nor even to deem one name appropriate over others, I find myself drifting toward dialectical terminology. The patterns in post-postmodern discourse indicate a recursion to modernism in its tying a search for truth to the consciousness of an individual, and a simultaneous adherence to postmodern lessons of cultural multiplicity. In this way, post-postmodernism can be seen as the resolution of dialectical conflict: if modernism served as a thesis, and postmodernism as an antithetical reaction to it, then post-postmodernism appears to serve as a synthesis of the two. The word “synthesis” makes sense not only in terms of the combination of elements of modernism and postmodernism into a new whole, but in terms of fusing ethnicities, genres, and materialist means of expression into a contemporary mode of literature. Thus, both because I think it is an accurate term and for the sake of brevity, I will refer to “post-postmodernist” literature as “synthesism” for the remainder of this essay.

Part I: Image in a Visual Culture

An anonymous entry in an article on American Literature on Allexperts.com describes “post-postmodern” literature as “an almost pop-culture level of enhanced imagery and scene structure influenced by film and television, and a symbolism that includes images from contemporary American culture.” The article notes Dave Eggers, David Foster Wallace, and Michael Chabon as important synthesist writers; however, the pioneer of both synthesist writing and contemporary image-driven minimalism is Raymond Carver (Rebein 28). Of course, the first self-proclaimed image-driven writers were the imagists, led by William Carlos Williams, of early modernism. Their maxim, “no ideas but in things,” was in part a reaction to the discursiveness of 19th Century literature and fueled a concision that, alongside T.S. Elliot’s notion of the objective correlative, transformed writing in English.

The contemporary shift toward image-driven writing, however, stems from what Italo Calvino terms a “civilization of images” (94). Calvino identified himself as “a product of an intermediate period” of progress toward a culture saturated with images. Calvino grew up in a world of comic strips and cinema; now we are bombarded with the images of television and film, interactive computer games replete with verisimilitudinous imagery, and the internet, practically infinite in its capacity to summon prefabricated images.

This vast and rapid transformation of the material structure of society has resulted in a concurrent change in culture. Visual rhetoric rivals the spoken word in cultural production. This affects contemporary literary production in two important ways: first, writers raised in a “civilization of images” are preconditioned to express their thoughts in images; secondly, readers

are similarly preconditioned to respond more strongly to image-driven writing, since it corresponds more meaningfully to their lived realities. Thus, image-driven writing seems inevitable in light of contemporary culture.

Calvino believes, however, that the writer's imagination is stifled in our times. He asks, "Will the power of evoking images of things that are *not there* continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images?" (91). In other words, Calvino worries that because the contemporary consciousness is so flooded with prefabricated images from visual commercial media—"like a rubbish dump" (92)—that when it tries to conjure up an image based on the printed word, a prefabricated image is more than likely to appear in the mind's eye than one conjured by the reader's imagination. The same danger looms for the writer, who's work—if Calvino's creative process can be seen as exemplary—entails conjuring an image in the mind and allowing that image to lead the writer to a story (89). It follows to reason that if we lose the power to craft images in our own imaginations, image-driven writing is doomed to replicate mass-media. If one were to only follow replicated images to story, those stories, logically, would also be replicas.

This places the synthesist writer in a perilous situation: artistic production in the contemporary world requires a focus on image; however, the writer must battle the flood of popular and commercially fabricated images that imperil her own imagination and that of her reader. This situation is far different from the cultural moment in which the original imagists found themselves, and requires a different deployment of image in writing. Calvino posits two solutions for the contemporary writer:

(1) We could recycle used images in a new context that changes their meaning.

Postmodernism may be seen as the tendency to make ironic use of the stock images of the mass media... (2) We could wipe the slate clean and start from scratch (95).

The second solution is vague and seems impossible, given the continuum of literature and culture as articulated in T.S. Elliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which claims that, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone... you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead [poets and artists]" (91). Because all new writing is built upon the tradition and work of "dead" artists, the slate cannot be wiped clean.

The first proposition is partially outdated with the fall from fashion of postmodern irony. Indeed, synthesist theorists and artists, almost across the spectrum, posit that irony, though not entirely irrelevant, has at least given way to the thirst among contemporary culture for sincerity and Truth-seeking. Russian philosopher Michael Epstein, for example, declares that post-Soviet literature, which he named, "Postconceptualism, or The New Sincerity, is an experiment in resuscitating 'fallen,' dead languages with a renewed pathos of love, sentimentality, and enthusiasm, as if to overcome [the] alienation," of postmodernism (146). Billy Childish and Charles Thomson's *Remodernism*, similarly, states that key to "Remodernist" art is

a declaration of intent to face the truth. Truth is what it is, regardless of what we want it to be. Being a spiritual artist means addressing unflinchingly our projections, good and bad, the attractive and the grotesque, our strengths as well as our delusions, in order to know ourselves and thereby our true relationship with others and our connection to the divine.

Thus, in light of the emphasis on truth-seeking of both Epstein and the Remodernists, as well as many other synthesist thinkers, Calvino's notion of utilizing images to create postmodern irony is outdated and does not reflect trends in contemporary culture.

However, the notion of changing the context of images to create new meanings, already widely practiced by synthesist writers, summons great possibilities. Context can be manipulated in many ways: an image may be extracted from a historical, geographical, or cultural location and deployed anew; it may be juxtaposed with another image, the conjunction of which refreshes the images with meaning; a single image may be deployed in a variety of guises and forms, turning a single image into a sort of narrative.

E. Annie Proulx is often overlooked by theorists exploring synthesist writing. Her novel *The Shipping News*, however, with its focus on individuals over group identities, its prioritization of sincerity over irony, and its representation of hybrid identities adheres to the qualities articulated by most schools of thought on the new wave of literature. Furthermore, Proulx captures these elements of synthesisism through a recontextualization of imagery via her characterization of the protagonist Quoyle:

All [of Quoyle's ostracism by siblings, peers, and parents] stemmed from Quoyle's chief failure, a failure of normal appearance... A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips...

The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face. (2)

In this passage Proulx reincarnates Victor Hugo's hunchback in all but name: the red hair, the deformation of face and body, the "failure" at normalcy amount to a paraphrase of Quasimodo's

appearance in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The name itself, Quoyle, resembles the hunchback's name in both its rarity and use of the unusual letter Q. Proulx essentially plucks Hugo's character from amidst his church bells and places him in contemporary North America, an instance of characterization through a mythologized image. Indeed, many horror-mythic characters rely on image over other attributes for characterization; however, because these characters—like Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, among others—have become loci of extensive cultural imagination and exploration, image and attributes are indistinguishable. The hunchback's deformed exterior has become denotative of his tortured interior. Thus, in invoking the image of the mythic character, Proulx summons the hunchback's internal qualities: his isolation, hopelessness, tragedy, etc.

Salman Rushdie—named a “post-postmodernist” by critic David Bennett, though he certainly straddles whatever hazy border exists between postmodernists and synthesists—similarly recontextualizes an exterior aspect of his protagonist's body in *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, Saleem often boils his own identity down to a single synecdochical reference: “the nose.” Through the single image of “the nose” Rushdie summons a host of intangible ideas and multiplicitous allusions.

Rushdie attaches meaning to Saleem's nose in overflowing proportions; toward the end of the novel, Saleem breaks down beneath the weight of it. The magical quality of his nose endows Saleem with telepathic abilities. Through it, he has a psychic connection with the 581 other “midnight's children”—the children born in the midnight hour marking India's independence. Thus, Saleem serves as a representative for all of these children, who serve, in turn, to represent all of India. As Jaina C. Sanga points out, because there were also 581 members of the new

parliament, Saleem "... represents the infinite possibilities for the modern nation of India" (28), becoming a sort of prime minister of the group—all via his magical nose. Thus, in a quick stroke, Rushdie summons the whole of the new Indian identity in a visual display of "multiplicity," one of the five attributes Calvino assigns to strong writing in *Six Memos for the New Millennium*.

Rushdie renders this link between Saleem and the newly born India concrete from the beginning of the novel. On the first page Saleem tells us that because he was born on the stroke of midnight of the day of India's independence, he is "... mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (3). The word "history" is no mistake here: Sanga notes that Saleem not only represents the new political entity that is India, but the much longer-lived cultural Indian identity as well:

In this metaphor—Saleem equals India—Rushdie's notion of fragments making up a whole is of crucial importance. Indian culture has always been associated with concepts of multiplicity and plurality... there are a variety of different languages used in India... The presence of two widely disparate religions—Hinduism and Islam—not to mention the wide array of other religions practiced in India—Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zorashtrainism, Christianity, and so on—has also contributed to a highly pluralistic culture. Moreover, Hinduism, which is practiced by a majority of the population and is tolerant of the inclusion of numerous deities, each privileging a separate way of life, is itself suggestive of notions of multiplicity and diversity (27).

Thus, the central magical image of Saleem's nose connects him to the multiplicity of India's history and culture, politics and identity.

Saleem's nose takes on even more meaning when juxtaposed with his antithesis, the other child born at the stroke of midnight: Shiva. Rushdie characterizes both Saleem and Shiva through synecdoche: Saleem is "the nose;" Shiva is "the knees." Saleem can read people's thoughts via his giant and dripping proboscis, but is largely ineffectual when it comes to action; Shiva possesses a magical ability to kill people using his knees as weapons. These central magical images represent the two opposing forces that may save or destroy the new India. Saleem's nose, representing empathy via its association with plurality and its ability to detect others' thoughts and feelings, embodies the opportunity for national unity and tolerance. Shiva's knees, conversely, symbolize violence. The manner in which he clamps his knees around his victims' necks represents constriction, the closure from ideas and understanding, and, ultimately, the reality of a country that tears itself apart along ethnic and religious lines. Thus, through nose and knees Rushdie encapsulates the unfolding history of the new nation.

Rushdie also employs nose and knees to cast the shadow of newly shed imperialism over the events of the story. The Indian nose and knees were both loci of racial prejudice on the part of British colonizers. The Indian people were often considered to have large noses compared to their British masters—we see this in Saleem's grandfather, whose nose was labeled "A proboscissimus" (8) by his European friends. George Orwell targets the location of racism in knees in his essay, "A Hanging": "He [the criminal to be hanged] walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees" (Norton 162). So, through his choice of nose and knees as central magical images, Rushdie calls forth colonial oppression, reinforcing the presence of the indelible stamp that Britain's rule left upon India.

Midnight's Children proves the extent to which multiplicity can be poured into a central magical image, compressing an “encyclopedia” of abstractions and connections into a quick, visible form—two of the five qualities of writing prized by Calvino. History, cultural identity, religion, and characterization are summoned forth in all of their richness via a nose. Thus, Rushdie renders the complex reality of an entire nation—itsself replete with multiplicity—through a mundane image, demonstrating that even an everyday image can resound with meaning given artful contextualization.

Arguably, *Midnight's Children* employs strongly postmodern devices—self-conscious narration, irony, deconstruction—to achieve goals that are equally postmodern—the undermining of “capital-H” history and linguistic play as a means of formulating meaning, for example—and postcolonial—the exploration of fragmented identity, the ramifications of colonial oppression, and oral storytelling as an alternative to Western truth-making. However, Rushdie’s novel also reflects synthesist aesthetics. Postcolonial writers are inherently more interested in at least quasi-universal ethical systems than “pure” postmodernists—*Midnight's Children* certainly condemns colonial power as unethical. Such a condemnation can be viewed as anti-postmodernist in light of postmodernist writers’ loyalty to deconstruction. As synthesist thinker Daniel Punday writes in *Narrative After Deconstruction*, “Deconstruction is seen by [feminist and postcolonial] critics variously as too much concerned with textual slippage or too much enamored with inescapable textual laws, a duality neatly embodied in [their] fear that the slippage between truth and falsity will end up reifying the current system of power” (7). In this concern, postcolonial theory and synthesist trends overlap: synthesists, like postcolonialists, fear that postmodern values of relativism, if too extreme, verge on nihilism. Punday, channeling French postmodern theorist

Lyotard, argues that postmodernism does, indeed, allow for condemnation of injustice via the *differend* (7-8), the discursive moment when one party gains power over another through the mediation of their conflict in language that privileges the first party (Lyotard 9).

Postcolonial thinkers, however, are dissatisfied with justice as merely a matter of language; likewise, synthesisists believe in truth that extends beyond language games. Punday suggests that post-deconstructivist writers seek truth in a narrative that “establishes ostensive reference” to “objects... that are the basis of dialogue...” (9). In other words, narrative becomes an answer to deconstruction when it employs an “object as an extra-linguistic permanence, as a ‘given’” (Lyotard 8). Punday’s conclusion, indeed the thrust of his entire book, is that narrative, when constructed around objects that exist outside of language, can transcend the problems of linguistic relativism and uncertainty. An “object” is most accurately rendered through a well-crafted image, in that images are by nature more directly ostensive than other linguistic constructions. Just as in film, the relationship between signifier and signified is “short-circuited”: film is naturally iconic in its ability to connect a “real” object with its filmed image (Monaco 127); similarly, image-driven writing creates the closest proximity between signifier and signified available to our arbitrary linguistic system. This not only validates the synthesisist writer’s prominent placement of image in fiction; it mandates the use of image to channel narrative.

Midnight’s Children can be seen as a narrative wrapped around a single, central image; similarly, E. Annie Proulx, in *The Shipping News*, manipulates a recurrent image to structure the entire story. Each chapter begins with a reference to an entry from *Ashley’s book of knots*. The first chapter, for example, introduces the protagonist via an image of rope: “Quoye: A coil of

rope./ ‘A Flemish flake is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made/ on deck, so that it may be/ walked on if necessary’” (1). This image, which garners additional verisimilitude through both its existence in the real world and its intertextuality, characterizes Quoye, who has been so thoroughly debased by a society that has branded him “freakish” that he is reduced to a single-layered personality of habitual victimhood, and is walked upon by his lover Petal as if he didn’t exist. Thus, the epigram stakes the narrative of the first chapter to an image. Proulx’s choice of image, a rope that can be configured in multiplicitous ways, is highly versatile. The beginning of each chapter features a knot that encapsulates the action and theme of the chapter, thus twisting a single material object into a new image that ties the narrative to the real world. Knots are also central to the reality of the novel, in that it takes place in a small Newfoundland town dependent on sea commerce.

Proulx and Rushdie’s deployment of image proves that, despite the overwhelming quantity of images in contemporary society, even images as heavily invested in popular culture as the hunchback, as mundane as a nose, or as old as a sailing knot may be invested with new and vigorous meaning when recontextualized. This should give hope to critics who see literature under threat in our “visually attuned culture, [in which] each successively younger generation appears to be less engaged with literature than the last” (Grassian 1). Where some see “the page and screen as antagonists locked in a death-struggle” (Green 5), others, like synthesist literary critic Daniel Grassian, see an opportunity for “hybridity”—or synthesis—of form. Those of us interested in writing literature should not view our “visually attuned culture” as a detriment; rather, we should write fiction that exploits our shared visual language as an opportunity, synthesizing the verbal and visual rhetoric into narratives that appeal to our new audience.

Part II: Character and New West Literature

“In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism takes the world away, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are 'involved', engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no 'author'; there is nowhere else, no other time or place.” –Alan Kirby

Such is the view of Alan Kirby, posited in his essay “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond.” He, like many others, believes that the postmodern era of literature is over. His argument is that “psuedo-modernism,” his term for synthesisism, is characterized by a materialist shift that has placed the reader at the center of artistic production:

By definition, pseudo-modern cultural products cannot and do not exist unless the individual intervenes physically. *Great Expectations* will exist whether anyone reads it or not. Once Dickens had finished writing it and the publisher released it into the world, its ‘material textuality’—its selection of words—was made and finished, even though its meaning, how people interpret it, would remain largely up for grabs. Its material production and its constitution were decided by its suppliers, that is, its author, publisher, serialiser etc alone—only the meaning was the domain of the reader. *Big Brother* on the other hand, to take a typical pseudo-modern cultural text, would not exist materially if nobody phoned up to vote its contestants off. Voting is thus part of the material textuality of the programme—the telephoning viewers write the programme themselves. (35)

Kirby goes on to note news broadcasts that air viewer emails and the internet, which forms itself through the clicks of the user but, more profoundly, comprises itself of user content. Indeed, the internet can be thought of as a near-infinite, global, multimedia, multi-dimensional text, one that is not preconfigured by a single artist, but that exists across time and in a unique space that allows its very being to unfold according to the demands and inclinations of the user. Kirby's focus is the "screen"—Jeremy Green's word for computers, film, and television. Strangely, Kirby does not trace the reader's pseudo-modern connection to traditional printed literature, even though his main concern is that literature is dying because of screen-culture. He should, for this same reader-as-creator phenomenon sprang forth in literature ten years prior to the internet with the advent of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, in which the reader takes the front seat in determining the unfolding of story. In the academic realm, reader response criticism recognized the power of the reader in determining meaning in literature as early as 1950, marked by Walter Gibson's essay, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers."

In Kirby's view all is lost in a world of "pseudo-modern" artistic production. Where Kirby sees disaster, Daniel Grassian sees a "contemporary American literature [that] is not only alive and well, but [one that] has mutated in exciting and important ways, reflecting the various, significant changes in American culture during the last twenty years" (2). While I agree with Grassian, Kirby's placement of the reader at the center of cultural production, though much more significant and possible in multimedia artistic production than in printed fiction, has several ramifications for the writer. Specifically, our contemporary moment mandates a focus on individuals over groups, close point-of-view over omniscience, and investment in characters with rich and complex psyches. Tom Wolfe in the 1970's predicted a return to realism (Rebein 17); in

terms of psychological realism he was correct. Synthesist schools of thought across the spectrum assert the same need. According to *Remodernism*, artists should “use art as an endeavor to know themselves and find themselves through art processes” (Childish and Thomson), implying a realistic expression of the discovered self. Similarly, new sincerity, stuckism, and many other attempts to characterize synthesist artistic and literary production emphasize the importance of finding “truth” through individual exploration. This follows hand-in-hand with the material side of artistic production pointed out by Kirby—that the individual has taken back center stage in art, along lines akin to modernism.

Since printed literature cannot be truly interactive by placing the reader in the seat of production—though hypertext poetry and other online literary production do attempt to do so—it must bond the reader to a rich and particularized individual with whom the reader can form an intimate, personal connection. This implies several craft choices for the writer. First, it justifies a close point-of-view, so that the reader may experience the fictional world through the point-of-view character’s consciousness. Many postmodernists use omniscient points-of-view, which makes sense given their desire to draw attention to artifices of storytelling and their “incredulity of grand narratives” (Bennett 7), as well as their portrayal of the world as one of staggering complexity. Pynchon’s work is probably the best example of a postmodern point of view: *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s point-of-view ranges from omniscient to close third in the first parts of the novel, moving freely from character to character; by the last quarter of the novel, when the reader has finally bonded with a perspective character, Slothrop, the point-of-view narrative fragments and digresses to the point that we lose track of Slothrop entirely, ending up in the consciousness of, for example, a light bulb. Such deconstruction of storytelling conventions is

fascinating, and doubtless important to the project of undermining the utility and legitimacy of “grand narratives.”

However, defying readers’ expectations and hopes in seeing Slothrop’s story carried to a resolution has also been dissatisfying to many readers. As Robert Rebein writes in *American Fiction After Postmodernism*, “Stranger still was the fact that so many critics and scholars who publicly supported literary postmodernism would readily confess, when asked in private, to little or no joy in reading [postmodern books] themselves” (2). If readers and critics before the tech revolutions of the 1990’s and their infinite distractions and ability to instantly gratify the consumer found little joy in Pynchon’s experimentation, then it should come as no surprise that contemporary readers have even further depleted patience for Pynchon-esque point-of-view trickery.

Hand in hand with postmodern fiction’s problematization of grand narrative through a complex and fragmented point of view is its drive to represent multiplicitous world views from identity groups outside of the Western patriarchal norm. Pynchon practices this in both *V* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* through his inclusion of the German involvement in the Herero culture of Namibia. Synthesist theorists and writers, by and large, still hold multiplicity to be essential to contemporary storytelling. As Rebein points out, some of the most successful new American fiction has been written by women and ethnic writers (19). Many synthesist writers, especially those of identities outside of the patriarchal white norm, undermine the “grand narrative” of Western imperialism simply by offering an alternative narrative of history from the point of view of an oppressed group. Such narratives are different from white postmodernists, like Pynchon, in that instead of fragmenting the narrative into many “little narratives” (Punday 5) they present an

alternative singular narrative to that of imperialist powers, creating a dichotomy of truths and histories. However, the presentation of such an alternative narrative always already refers to the grand narrative of Western imperialism; thus, even the singular narratives of ethnic and women writers are inherently part of pluralizing the narrative of history.

Daniel Grassian identifies an aspect of contemporary American culture that offers an alternative to two competing grand narratives: “In the past twenty years, America has become even more of a cultural melting pot as cultures blend and sometimes conflict, producing individuals with hybrid identities and allegiances” (100). He goes on to identify writers such as Sherman Alexie and Michelle Serros who explore the struggles of multiethnic characters who experience a “double-consciousness” as articulated by W.E.B. Dubois. Such double-consciousness, though originally articulated as a term to identify a residual problem of colonialism, is a solution to the synthesist who wishes to explore multiplicity in terms of resisting a grand narrative through the narratives of diverse communities, but is also bound by a cultural emphasis on the individual to a close point-of-view character. The solution that many synthesist writers have come to is the craft choice of composing point-of-view characters whose identities are inherently hybrid, allowing them to adhere to a close point-of-view, and thus satisfy the contemporary reader’s need to bond to an individual, and still represent contemporary conflict between oppressed and oppressive identity groups. I will explore how one such hybrid character operates in Luis Urea’s *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*.

First, however, I would like to situate my discussion of Urrera’s novel in the context of New Western fictional discourse. Rebein, in his book *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, summarizes Russell Martin’s characterization of New West literature:

1. It attempts to “represent all of the region’s ethnic and social variety.”
2. It has “to take the lingering mythology of the Old West head-on....”
3. It is “focused on landscape” (Rebein 110).

Rebein devotes considerable energy in his chapter on “The West, or, the Borderlands” to *Blood Meridian*, the majority of which gets caught up in tracing symmetries between the novel and *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Absalom-Absalom*. However informative and convincing the similarities in composition and theme between these works, his discussion does little to shed light on the relationship between *Blood Meridian* and Russell Martin’s three characterizing attributes of New West literature. He is remiss in not doing so, in that, though the novel is set in the Old West, it relates to Russell’s attributes in informative—and troubling—ways.

Starting from the end of the list, McCarthy indisputably invests himself in the landscape of the west, bringing it to life in highly lyric passages throughout *Blood Meridian* and also bringing it into the conflict of the novel. Rebein quotes John R. Milton’s *The Novel of the American West* as stating, “The Western novel... to be authentic, must be... a novel of the land, a novel in which the land actually becomes a character, a force to be reckoned with, part of the conflict as well as the background” (111). This is true throughout McCarthy’s novel; one of the most striking scenes in which the land “becomes a character” against which the Kid must struggle occurs when he becomes separated from the troop of scalp hunters after their battle with the Mexican army. The kid traverses an unnamed mountain range, in danger of becoming lost, suffering from hypothermia, his feet frozen “like clubs” (212):

It grew colder and the night lay long before him. He kept moving, following in the darkness the naked chines of rock blown bare of snow. The stars burned with a lidless

fixity and they drew nearer in the night until toward dawn he was stumbling among the whinstones of the uttermost ridge to heaven, a barren range of rock so enfolded in that gaudy house that stars lay awash at his feet and migratory spalls of burning matter crossed constantly about him on their chartless reckonings. In the predawn light he made his way out upon a promontory and there received first of any creature in that country the warmth of the sun's ascending. (213)

In this passage McCarthy invokes the sublime as articulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, who described it as something too great in measure to be perceived wholly by human senses; simultaneously, however, faculties of reason can grasp the concept of the thing completely in the mind (68-69). There is successive pain and pleasure in sublime confrontation, stemming from this lack of “concordance,” according to Kant. In this sublime moment, at which the Kid faces a universe at once infinite with stars and simultaneously on fire, the Kid's struggle against the wilderness is put into dramatic relief. If the stars serve as synecdoche for the natural world—a strange synecdoche, given the near infinite difference in size between the perceivable galaxy and the wilderness the Kid is lost in—then their unfathomability by the senses serves to place the Kid at a sublime confrontation that is both mathematical and dynamical: the stars are too great for him to count, yet he can grasp them as a whole system; as synecdoche, they represent natural forces that threaten his destruction.

Contemporary theorists of art and literature positing a “return” to modernism would point to this moment in the Kid's journey as an example of their theory in practice. For, knit into the passage above is a foreshadowing of the Kid's ultimate conquest of nature that comes several pages later. Though nature seems threatening and incomprehensibly vast and chaotic, it becomes

subservient to the Kid in several places: the “stars lay awash at his feet”; they are “chartless” as compared with the Kid’s ability to navigate the wilderness; they burn from the sky around him, foreshadowing his discovery of the burning tree the next night—which is not only a Biblical reference to divine intervention on behalf of humanity, but also a symbol of human superiority to nature. Finally, the Kid receives the sun “first of any creature,” placing him before all of nature in superiority; furthermore, the stars’ unification into a single sun assembles the chaos into a benevolent singularity easily comprehended by sense and reason. Thus, the sublime is experienced and overcome, a quality of modernist thought according to Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, in that for modernists the pleasure of the sublime ultimately overcomes the pain, resulting in a transcendence of the individual over the infinite. This is in counterpoint to postmodernist writers, who employ the sublime to highlight the instability and multiplicity of the world beyond human reckoning. In other words, both modernist and postmodernist writers invoke sublime experience. The difference is in the resolution of the experience: modernists transcend it, while postmodernists, whose goals are to subvert grand truth-making, do not (Lyotard 77-78).

The Kid’s experience against the wilderness uses the sublime as a vehicle of transcendence over and subjugation of the natural world—a common theme of Western literature. The Kid does not triumph, however, over the Judge. The Judge is a lens through whom one can view McCarthy’s attempt to “take the lingering mythology of the Old West head-on.” *Blood Meridian* is ultimately an attempt to redress the horror of American Western expansion through unflinching representation of the atrocities perpetrated by Americans against citizens of Mexico and Native Americans. The Judge becomes a near God-like manifestation of the

expanding United States: his knowledge is limitless, just as the United States is a secular, rationalist entity; he often invokes God, just as the United States saw its expansion as manifest by a greater power; he is a master of nature, just as the United States saw all of the natural world as its rightful dominion; he is unsurpassed in war, just as the United States' military was the superior power of the hemisphere. Moreover, he encapsulates the mythic cowboy figure: he's inherently solitary, even as a part of Glanton's crew; he possesses the trickster qualities of the coyote, demonstrated in the ambush at the volcano when he creates gunpowder from bat guano and lures a tribe of warriors through deception; he is attuned to the natural world, demonstrated by his cataloguing of plants along the group's journey. These traits of the traditional cowboy, combined with the Judge as a symbol of the United States, subvert the cowboy myth when coupled with the Judge's acts of horrific violence—such as his sexual violations of children and the Idiot, and more generally his role as a leader of the band that murders unarmed children, women, and men—and his lack of any sort of ethos, even an “outlaw” ethos that traditionally prioritizes chivalry and altruism. Thus, McCarthy does not so much draw on the cowboy myth as deconstruct and decimate it piecemeal, leaving no positive quality intact.

Chekhov once wrote that the writer's job is not to solve the problem but simply to state it correctly. McCarthy certainly poses the problem of violence in the struggle for conquest over the American West accurately; however, contrary to Chekhov's axiom, in synthesist literature presenting the problem in the way McCarthy does is not enough. McCarthy's failure lies in character: though he presents a horrifying picture of the victimization of Native American and Mexican people, he fails to give even one victim the essential traits of humanity: a personality, a history, defining features, or, most importantly, a voice. Colonial oppression—military, cultural,

linguistic, and artistic—silenced its subjects, reduced them to a homogenous, faceless throng to be subjugated. Though the ethos of *Blood Meridian* clearly problematizes that subjugation, it does nothing to give humanity to the people from whom it has been robbed by colonialism. One of the lessons of postmodernism is to endorse cultural relativism as a maxim of artistic production, and to ensure a multiplicity of voices weighing into it—as Pynchon did with the Herero population in his novels. More significantly, according to Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy—editors of *Postmodern American Fiction*, a Norton anthology—a major subset of postmodern writing is the “retelling [of] history from a previously buried or provocatively transformed viewpoint” (291), which in their anthology is predominated by authors of oppressed groups, both ethnic and female, Toni Morrison, Art Spiegelman, Susan Daitch, Sherman Alexie, and Leslie Silko among them.

Both Grassian and Rebein emphasize the importance of Silko and Alexie as contemporary writers from particular ethnic identities. However, both theorists also emphasize the “oversimplification” of multiculturalism: Grassian writes, “Some scholars have rightly challenged the notion of multiculturalism because it forces people to choose a specific ethnicity, when a larger number of Americans, perhaps even a majority of Americans, are ethnically hybrid” (102); Rebein devotes a chapter to “Tribes and Breeds,” most of which discusses the work of ethnically or culturally enriched writers. In synthesist New West writing telling a story from an other-than-white-male point of view is key; however, synthesists also have a responsibility to acknowledge the complexity of contemporary ethnicity and identity. Museum curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who calls contemporary artistic production “altermodernism,” describes it as such:

Multicultural ideology pretends to resolve the problem of modernism from a quantitative point of view: more and more “cultural specificities” rear their heads, and, supposedly, this is positive. A new internationalist spirit has taken up the relay of the modernist universalism, but it lies in the internationalism of folklores and of “identities”. Artists are looking for a new modernity that would be based on translation: What matters today is to translate the cultural values of cultural groups and to connect them to the world network. This “reloading process” of modernism according to the 21st century issues could be called altermodernism, a movement connected to the creolisation of cultures....

Regine Debatty of the website *We Make Money Not Art* clarifies Bourriaud’s theory in the context of the 20th Century continuum of art as follows: “If early twentieth-century Modernism is characterised as a broadly Western cultural phenomenon, and Postmodernism was shaped by ideas of multi-culturalism, origins and identity, Altermodern is expressed in the language of a global culture.” Whether a truly global culture exists or not, the broad consensus is that, while synthesists may have largely discarded other aspects of postmodernism—such as formalistic deconstruction and cynicism—one that they have synthesized and transformed is the postmodern exploration of multiculturalism into new literary expressions of ethnic hybridity.

As synthesisism, McCarthy’s novel fails the above test in its rendering of the “other” as a faceless, culturally devoid mass—just as colonialists characterized the many cultures and ethnicities that they subjugated and exterminated. As a New West novel, *Blood Meridian* fails to meaningfully achieve Martin’s first quality, to “represent all of the region’s ethnic and social variety.”

A novel of the New West that is vastly successful is Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*. The novel's protagonist, Teresita, from whose point of view much of the story emerges, is herself deeply hybrid: she is an illegitimate child, her mother a poor Yaqui Indian peasant, her father a wealthy Spanish landowner; she possesses a forceful "masculine" spirit, demonstrated when she takes custody of the interloper Cruz, while serving as a typically feminine midwife; she is a hybrid of science—she learns to read, bucking norms of both gender and station—and traditional spiritual practices—she uses *curandera* arts to heal the sick. Thus, in one close point-of-view character, Urrea encapsulates the multiplicity of ethnic hybridity within Teresita, but also hybridities of class, gender, culture, and spirituality. In this way, though Urrea's novel is a historical work set in the late 1900's, and thus a retelling of history along the lines of Geyh, Leebron, and Levy's description of a subset of postmodernism, Teresita also serves as a window into contemporary synthesist ideology, which struggles to fuse disparate identities into "shared experience" (Childish and Thomson), a unity striven for by the majority of theorists and activists of the synthesist community.

Conclusion to Parts I and II: Sublime Multiplicity

The contemporary world of literature is itself a sublime place, in which multiplicitous forces almost beyond reckoning interact to create a cultural reality that is, as Bourriaud says, increasingly global. Bourriaud refers to the globe ethnically; indeed, literary production, particularly in the United States, must serve a global community. Already our cultural products, from our fast-food to our television programs to our news media, enjoy worldwide distribution. United States literature, moreover, has a particular advantage since English has become the global lingua franca. Aside from the global market place, United States literature has a responsibility to serve its own highly pluralistic community; indeed, in a postcolonial world, to ignore ethnic pluralism is both inaccurate and against the interest of the writer commercially, since the nation's consumer base is comprised of multiplicitous ethnicities—and largely women.

However, beyond ethnic and cultural globalism, synthesist literary production must acknowledge and exploit the complexity of a globe that is not just coming together in the “first” reality, but one which is becoming increasingly dominated by a “second life.” This refers to the existence of the individual on the net, where one may construct an identity largely different from one's off-line self. Phenomena like Facebook and MySpace are often labeled as a promotion of self-absorption and navel-gazing; however, they also promote self-reflection and self-awareness, attributes which, as a writer, I prize in a readership. The creation of a second self, after all, is a projection of imagination not unlike the creation of a character in a novel.

The internet is, indeed, one of the prime engines for globalization and the promotion of a

culture of self-reflection; it is also the most powerful force on the planet in educating a readership that is literate in visual rhetoric—and in promoting textual literacy, since the internet is comprised of words as well as images. The synthesist writer must exploit this visual literacy, fusing word and image into a medium that engages the contemporary reader. The synthesist community is already replete with such writers. Stuart Dybek's collection *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* often forms a story around a central image that unifies and powers the story. Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* employs comic books as both a text to connect with the reader visually and as a means to render the protagonist's interior turmoil dramatically. Perhaps most notable in synthesist writing is Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, which employs the very words on the page in a visually dynamic way. Not only do the words mimic the action of the story in form—i.e. formulating themselves into a falling pattern when something falls, or appearing one word to a page during a suspenseful moment, thereby accentuating suspense—but they also reflect the surrealism of the story in their visual composition: at certain points in the novel the words on one page are printed in mirrored-reverse on the overleaf, thereby creating the illusion that the reader can see through the solid page and look at the previous page from behind, as if the paper were transparent. Such craft results in a visual experience like no other in literature to date.

Synthesism, thus, goes beyond postmodern multiplicity, to fuse perceived dialectical opposites into new forms: popular and literary artistic expression, ethnicity and gender, screen and page, identity group and individual all unite into a mass “creolisation” of form and identity. The responsibilities and challenges facing the contemporary writer by such synthesis seem overwhelming: in Dickens's day, to re-invoke Kirby's example of an author working in a very

different time, his audience was much more homogenous, and words on the page did not have to compete with second-life alter-realities like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*. However, the struggles to understand language of the postmodernists and the redressing—still underway—of colonial oppression by the postcolonialists has also created a unique and exciting time in literature that invites—even requires—the contemporary writer to push her imagination and awareness beyond the bounds of her own comfort-zone, to create a second-life in words that is as engaging and diverse as the first. In other words, in our post-deconstructive era it is the synthesist's job not simply to pick up what has been taken apart and “reconstruct” the past, as the reconstructivists and remodernists imply, but to synthesize a new understanding of the world from the parts. We should be excited by the opportunity that such synthesis provides and welcome the hard and fruitful work that it will require.

Part IV: Application of Synthesism to *Blood Heist*

The pleasure of writing this preface lay in the study of new trends of artistic production and figuring out their implications for contemporary writers—very worthwhile goals in and of themselves. However, the main function of this essay is to explicate my own influences and rationales for choices I've made in my dissertation. The novel that follows has sprung from the two elements of craft that this preface focuses on: image and character. When I arrived at UNM's writing program, I was already an image-driven writer. When I sat down to begin a new project, often it would spring from an intriguing or problematic image in my mind. In that way, I was and still am similar to Calvino in my creative process.

Many of my colleagues and teachers noted, however, that I was weak on character. My protagonists often seemed flat or stock, with unclear motivations and opaque psyches. Taking that criticism to heart, I have poured my energy into forging a story that is built on character. *Blood Heist* adheres to the close point of view of a single protagonist, John Stick. I have tried to imagine his psyche as deeply as possible and render the fictional world through that psyche. If John Gardner is correct that the writer's job is to create a "fictional dream" for the reader to experience, then I want that dream to be John Stick's.

I have imagined John Stick according to principles derived from the works discussed earlier in this preface. Stick is a reinvigoration of a mythic archetype: the giant. Giants in mythology are usually misunderstood and outcast. Stick demonstrates these qualities; moreover, his journey as a character is to overcome them and transform himself. Stick, because he's afflicted with giantism, is a member of an oppressed identity group. Just as people of non-white

ethnicities and women have been underrepresented in literature in English, so have “deformed” or disabled people. Stick is also an ethnically hybrid person in that he has a mix of Native American, Chicano, and Anglo blood. Finally, Stick is hybrid in gender. While he is a man biologically, I tried to write him with qualities that are stereotypically feminine: he’s a caretaker of other life, he’s patient, he grows and cultivates, he’s peaceful. In fact, only when he’s doing things that are untrue to his nature does he resort to rashness, selfishness, or violence. An important part of his journey is to discard such impulses.

I not only wanted to write a protagonist who demonstrates qualities of caring, patience, and kindness because I think they’re the finest qualities that a human being can build a life around; I also wanted to subvert the cowboy hero stereotype. Cowboy heroes are loners and masters of violence. Stick starts out as both: his natural strength makes him very adept at violence; he lives alone in his apartment beneath the earth. His journey takes him to a crisis moment in which his care for another and stolidity in the face of brute force win the day. It also removes him from isolation and makes him a member of a community of people that respect and love him for his kindness, and away from those who value him for his size and strength. Stick, thus, is a Western hero whose heroic attributes are antithetical to those that comprise the traditional hero.

Thus, through Stick I have tried to take the cowboy mythology of the Old West “head on.” My novel adheres to Martin’s other qualities of New West literature, as well, in that it attempts to give voice and depth to colonially oppressed identity groups. My major attempt at this is through the character Alma. The premise of the novel is that three men attempt to rob a blood bank in order to sell the blood on the black market across the Mexican border. This is a

farcical allusion to American crime capers, in that the norm is to run to Mexico with stolen money or to flee from the law. Generally, Mexico gets no say in its representation as such a destination. Alma, a citizen of Mexico, is my attempt to redress this trend. Hers is a voice that condemns the men's plan as both stupid and immoral; she's also central to halting their machinations. Furthermore, she draws Stick out from his isolation by becoming his friend and enlisting a group of people who care about him to come to his aide in the finale of the story.

I've written Martin's third quality, that landscape must figure centrally, into the novel by setting the action in a landscape that is distinctly New Mexican. The characters' journey takes place in the mountainous desert, in which weather, thirst, and flora and fauna all factor. The Rio Grande figures as a framing location, at which the story begins and ends, and as a sublime force that figures into the crisis moment of the story.

A major goal of the novel was to explore the oddities of present-day New Mexico. Thus, I've written ostrich and alpaca ranches, roving internet buses, contemporary mythology, and postmodern economies into the story. Depicting the collision of old and new ways of life and means of production has always been central to Western literature, e.g. in contrasting rail and automobile infrastructures with those of traditional horse culture. Calvino's notion of placing two images together to reinvigorate them is at work here, as well. An ostrich in the Old West landscape, a reservation using the internet as a means of reinventing its economy, a tandem bicycle involved in a horseback chase are all examples of images that are dynamic in their juxtaposition. Furthermore, I've based them all on reality. Ostrich farms are now present in the Southwest; I read an article recently about a single mother who makes her living posting links on Google; unicyclists have ridden the span of the entire nation, which seems *much* more

implausible than people achieving that same goal by tandem bike. The theft and sale of blood may seem far-fetched, but the harvest and sale of organs is real, and in many countries people are compensated for their blood. In the United States blood banking is a “billion dollar industry” according to Gilbert Gaul, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his expose on the profit of the blood industry. Thus, within our own borders blood is already a commodity. Even the most far-fetched presence in the novel—the *chupacabras*, a creature that sucks blood from goats—has a strong basis in cultural reality. It is a new mythic creature, having only been spotted as recently as the 1990’s; since then, sightings have run rampant across the Americas, with various first-hand accounts, drawings, and even photographs cropping up across Texas, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. I’m not claiming to be a believer, personally, but a cult of people are.

Contemporary society has already placed many of my novel’s images both in unexpected contexts and in unexpected couplings; my job in many cases was simply to document them, tweaking them to fit the story. However, the work will still probably struggle against a certain amount of incredulity in the reader. I’ve essentially rounded up every bizarre facet of contemporary society that I could and made a story out of them.

Another reservation that I anticipate among readers, though I’m sure there are many I can’t anticipate, is the issue of appropriation. I am a straight White male. But I’m also a New Mexican, driven to write by a love for the place and the culture. This puts me in a very problematic situation. Many writers, activists, and academics claim that men have no right to tell the stories of women and that White people shouldn’t tell the stories of ethnicities that they’ve historically repressed. These are important arguments. When an oppressor tells the story of the oppressed it can amount to another form of oppression, even if the writer has the most

progressive intentions possible. I have troubled myself long and hard over this issue.

In the end, I come out on the side of empathy. If White men are forbidden to write about any other identity group, they would produce only stories with white men in them—which seems a dangerous recursion to the solipsism of colonial days. As a New Mexican, to populate my stories with nothing but White men would be a lie about my culture, which is exciting to me largely due to its multiplicity. A New Mexican story must be diverse in ethnicity, gender, and class. My sense is that if a writer empathetically renders an “other,” doing his or her best to capture that character in all their complexity, then that’s a good start. We should wrestle out our best, most moral efforts onto the page. And then we should be criticized for what we do wrong. Such a system creates a dialogue that cannot help but expose prejudices, increase intercultural communication, and broaden understanding.

But it’s a risk. I set out to try to write a novel that was, at least in part, about the special ethnic milieu that is New Mexico and the unique relationship that our state has, due to our complexity as a colonized place, with Mexico. I cut much, if not all of that from the final draft. I don’t believe I’m qualified to handle it. In an earlier draft, I also gave much more prominent placement to Alma, the character from Mexico, as a way of trying to give our neighbor a stronger voice in the work. I abandoned a good deal of that because it didn’t seem to fit into the story.

In the end, I realized that the book wanted to be about men. It wanted to explore masculine culture, in all of its ugliness and tenderness. I think the reason that it went in that direction is because I find masculinity so troubling. Society lumps us into two genders: women and men. This implies that I have something universally in common with billions of males I know nothing about. Furthermore, men do terrible things. Feminists are right when they say that

we're the murderers, rapists, war-mongers, and ruthless capitalists of the world. I'm none of those things, yet I'm still somehow a man.

On a more subtle level, male heroes of literature and other cultural production, especially film, tend to all share common traits: they're violent, they're self-serving, and they objectify women. I don't want to be or do any of those things, either! So, part of the reason my book steered itself in the direction it did was because the elements of the story that troubled me the most were the terrible acts of its male characters. Narrative finds power in problematization. Beyond that, I wanted to pose a solution. I wanted to write a male hero who demonstrates traits deemed feminine by our culture, to show that there is an alternative to the archetype of masculine hero who we celebrate in the fictional world, and at whose hands we suffer injustices in the real one. To serve these ends, the novel explores male characters who perpetrate all of the terrible acts that men do in reality—my male characters are liars, thieves, bullies, criminals, and abusers. Simultaneously, it renders men who are kind. In the resolution of the story, kindness wins the day, which may seem as implausible as the *chupacabras* emerging from the New Mexican mountains. But it's an implausibility that I'm willing to risk.

My novel takes risks in the realm of plausibility and in its appropriation of others' experiences. I take those risks consciously. I share Joyce Carol Oates's opinion that, "art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment, and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and many not even wish" (xx). The very premise of *Blood Heist* is disturbing, as are many steps along the way; my hope is that the journey comes to rest in a place of sympathy.

Works Cited

- “American Literature.” AllExperts Encyclopedia. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Bennett, David. “Salma Rushdie as Post-postmodernist.” *The Review of Education/ Pedagogy/ Cultural Studies* Vol 19 No 1 (1997): 1-37.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. “Modern, Postmodern, Altermodern?” Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, 2005. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos For the New Millennium*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. New York: Picador, 2000.
- Childish, Billy and Charles Thomson. “The Stuckists.” The Hangman Bureau of Enquiry, 1999. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Childish, Billy and Charles Thomson. “The Remodernist Manifesto.” The Art History Archive, 2000. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- Debatty, Regine. “Altermodern at Tate Britain.” We Make Money Not Art, 2009. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Dybek, Stuart. *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003.
- Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *The Best American Essays of the 20th Century*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Epstein, Mikhail, Alexander A. Genis, and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover. *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.
- Gibson, Walker. “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers.” *Reader-Response Criticism*. Jane P. Tompkins, Ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980.
- Gaul, Gilbert M. “Blood.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The Philadelphia Inquirer, 24 Sep. 1989. Web. 26 March 2010.
- Grassian, Daniel. *Hybrid Fictions*. Jefferson: MacFarland, 2003.

- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Hickman, Larry A. *Pragmatism As Post-Postmodernism: Lessons From John Dewey*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Raleigh, N.C. Alex Catalogue. Web. 20 Nov 2009.
- Kirby, Alan. "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond." *Philosophy Now*. info?
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Post-Modern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Introduction: The Art of the American Essay." *The Best American Essays of the Century*. Ed. Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Orwell, George. "A Hanging". *Good Reasons With Contemporary Arguments*. Ed. Lester Faigley and Jack Selzer. New York: Pearson, 2007. 162.
- Petrovic, Lena. "Hear the Voice of the Artist: Postmodernism as Faustian Bargain." *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*. Ed. Klaus Steirstorfer. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003.
- Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. Eds. Paula Geyh, Fred B. Leebron, and Andrew Levy. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Proulx, Annie. *The Shipping News*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Punday, Daniel. *Narrative After Deconstruction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Punter, David. "e-textuality: Authenticity after the postmodern." source?
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Rebein, Robert. *Hicks, Tribes, & Dirty Realists*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Sanga, Jaina C. Salman Rushdie's Postcolonial Metaphors. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Sunami, Chris. "Reconstructivist Art." Kitoba, 2004. Web. 20 Nov 2009.

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *The Hummingbird's Daughter*. New York: Back Bay Books/ Little, Brown and Company; 2005.

"Post-postmodernism." *Wikipedia*. Web. 20 Nov 2009.

Chapter 1

The Giant

A giant sprinted across the desert. His name was John Stick. He leapt over cholla, stands of prickly pear like cupped hands, clumps of brown desert grass. He was over seven feet tall and carried a garbage bag over one shoulder. It jounced against his back and sounded like ice chips. A bloodstain, dried and dark, slashed the thigh of his jeans. He had thinning brown hair and a massive, brooding brow. His eyes were the color of hickory, kind eyes. He was lanky and lean and, like all creatures that run through the desert, built to cover long, starving distances. His bones stood from his face like formations cut from rock.

A red dusk bled across the sky from the west where the sun fell beyond the rim of a distant mesa. Stick was rounding a yucca plant, with its totem-thick trunk, covered with scales, its bulb like the head of a titan bristling with long leaves of hair. Beyond the plant, the land dropped away in a slope down into a gentle valley of dust where cacti grew in low clusters. As he rounded the mane of swords, the bulb exploded. Half the yucca's head hung mangled as a rifle report rolled across the land, overtaking the giant like a back wind. A warning shot. He halted next to the yucca plant. The plant would never heal. It'd live three hundred more years with a face deformed by a shot meant for Stick.

“Stop!” The word rolled over him from behind. Stick raised his big hands in the air, one of them dangling the garbage bag full of ice. He had expected that voice, like saw teeth on stone. He knew the steady hand that held the rifle, the eye behind the site. He knew this air, empty of wind and moisture. No better air for a bullet to fly true.

The sun set. The steps across the gravelly earth came singly, ploddingly, and Stick knew that the man with the rifle, Spartacus Rex, hands steady as anvils, walked slowly because he kept one eye pressed to the site. Stick didn't think the little man would kill him, but he believed that he'd put a bullet through his arm, his leg—or worse, pierce the garbage bag full of ice, pierce the bag within the bag, the plastic medical bag of blood as red as the dusk sky. The bag of the blood of the woman he loved.

“You bastard traitor sonnofabitch,” Rex hollered across the landscape as he paced closer. “You pact-breaking motherfucker.” His plodding footsteps, the giant's panting lungs. “I oughta kill you where you stand. I oughta put a bullet through both your knees and leave you to the coyotes. I oughta put my knife through your hands, loop the holes with twine, and nail you to a tree.”

Stick lowered the bag to the ground and turned. Not a hundred feet away, Rex was glaring at Stick with eyes hard and imperfect like stones dug from deep beneath the ground. He wore a camouflage jacket, patched with pine, sage, and olive greens that stood out like flags in this world of brown. His black jackboots crunched the dirt. A big hunting knife hung on his belt.

“I'd wondered when this day would come. When you'd betray me for some fuckin' woman.” Rex was talking about the blood in the garbage bag filled with the ice. He was talking about the crippled woman Stick loved. “I knew if you ever got a woman, you'd turn into a traitor.”

The sun set and Stick didn't know how to answer. The ice clicked inside the garbage bag. The sky edged toward blackness and stars blinked open their eerie, twinkling eyes. Rex was right. Stick had betrayed the woman he loved; he'd betrayed his best friend, too. He was lost in a

desert, a hundred miles from anywhere, between a bag of his lover's blood and the barrel of his best friend's gun.

Chapter 2

The Brine Shrimp

Stick and Rex had been friends ever since Rex rescued Stick during recess in first grade thirty years earlier. That was the year that Stick's mother had died. Stick had never been apart from her for more than an hour or two until that first day of school. His father, a small, quiet man, had kept Stick inside the house as much as possible to protect him from the wide eyes and murmurings. His mother never left the house because the same giantism that afflicted Stick had crippled her, turned her bones brittle so that they broke with any small stress. She'd been bedridden since Stick could remember, a long brown body that only moved slowly and with trembling effort.

When his father dropped Stick off in his first grade class, the teacher just stared him up and down. The other kids stared at him, too. They were all sitting in tiny chairs with the attached desks that swung up and around like boney growths. Stick stood by one of the little desk-chairs and felt the eyes of the whole class on him. Finally, the teacher sighed and said, "We'll have to get you a fifth grade desk," and she left the room to look for one.

During recess, Stick didn't know what to do, so he hovered at the head of the big field near the teacher on recess duty. The playground lay vast and bleak before him, two acres of dirt and strangers and old, beat-up playground equipment. Finally, a squinting little kid with dusty brown hair, a big jaw, skinny arms, and large, dirty hands walked up to him. Stick towered over him but his eyes remained on the little patch of earth between his feet.

"What grade you in?" the kid demanded.

“First,” Stick said.

“Yer a liar,” the kid said.

The teacher on duty clucked her tongue. “We don’t call people liars, Spartacus,” she said.

The little kid ignored her. “You really in first grade?” he said and whistled. “Yer the biggest kid in school. What’s yer name?”

“Johnny,” Stick said.

“Mine’s Spartacus Rex. We’re best friends now. Call me by my last name, like they do in the army. I’m gonna join one day so I can shoot people.”

“My last name’s Stick.”

Rex grabbed Stick’s sleeve. “C’mon Stick, teachers stink.” The teacher rolled her eyes and Rex led Stick away across the yard.

From that day forward it was the two of them. After school they spent the afternoons riding bikes along the high banks of the Rio Grande. Rex had a beat-up dirt bike and Stick had a woman’s bike with no middle bar that Rex made fun of him for, but it was all he had. Back then everything west of the river was dust and tumbleweeds and wind. They hunted rattlesnakes but never found one. They found garters and bull snakes and brown snakes, and lizards of every stripe, some with blue tails that came off in your hand like souvenirs so the lizard could get away. The tails could be saved and put on somebody’s lunch tray in the school cafeteria, or in the pocket of a teacher’s coat, or just thrown at some shrieking girl, like Rex’s little sister, whose name was Cryopathria but whom everybody just called Cry.

The Rio Grande started in the mountains of Colorado and ran all the way through New Mexico to Texas where it became the border between Texas and Mexico, where they called it the

Rio Bravo. Stick's dad was Mexican, some people said, but he said he was Chicano, which made him really more Spanish than Mexican. Stick didn't understand the difference, but his father got mad when people called him Mexican. He also refused to ever speak Spanish and Stick's uncle made fun of his accent when he spoke English, which was always. His dad was always saying, "My son will grow up speaking good English so he can have every opportunity." He looked proud and sad every time he said it. Stick's mom and uncle were part Anglo, part Navajo.

Stick had read a library book about Mexico. He checked it out again and again. It had the names of old Mexican cities: Tenochtitlan, Chalco, Tlacopan, Texcoco, Yautepec, and Xochimilco. Mexican gods too: Huitzilopochtli who looked like a hummingbird, Ometeculhtli, Tlatoc, Coatlicue, and Quetzalcoatl who was a feathered, flying snake. New Mexico had only one god, Jesus, to whom Stick and his dad prayed every Sunday in church. His mom was too weak and crippled to go. The names of places in New Mexico were in English: Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Grants, Gallup, Cortes, Truth or Consequences. The Mexican cities were really hard to say, and once Stick walked up to the nice librarian with the long, loose hair and crazy skirts with wild swirls of color, and pointed to *Xochimilco* in his book and asked her how to say it. She laughed and laughed. Those Mexican cities were long gone. The New Mexican cities were still around, and Stick figured the difference had something to do with the language you said them in. Which was maybe why his dad never spoke anything but English.

Sometimes Stick and Rex saved up the fifty cents and took the bus across the city to the foothills that lumped at the base of the Sandia Mountains, the range that towered gray and jagged over the city like the fin of the dinosaur Dimetrodon. There were dead dinosaurs everywhere under the earth. The mountains were just rocks piled on heaps of them and all you had to do was

dig deep enough and you'd find their old bones. Stick had a dream that he would one day be an archeologist who was so tall he wouldn't even need a ladder to get in and out of the holes where he dug up the bones. Stick's library books mostly just showed cartoon drawings of dinosaurs: Dimetrodon, Plesiosaurus, Duckbill, Brontosaurus, Allosaurus which was a meat-eater, and Pterodactyl which was half bird, half dinosaur. But in one book they had a photograph of the actual bones flattened into the surface of an ancient brown rock. The bones were crooked and cracked and thin and brown—and they looked as fragile as Stick's mom's body, slowly crumbling away in her bed.

She died in the winter. During the few weeks before her death, Stick's father would go to clean the school during the day, then come home at night to sit by her bed and quietly cry into her sheets as she blinked up at the ceiling. She'd gone deaf by then, and her bones were disintegrating inside of her body. Every time they rolled her over to clean her or she reached a trembling hand up to touch Stick's cheek as he knelt on the floor beside her salvaged hospital bed, irreparable damage was done to the skeleton that held her together. She crunched and crackled, as brittle as a tumbleweed. Then one evening, as she lay there, her eyes slowly drained of light and Stick realized that she was dead. He backed slowly out of the room, where his father had fallen asleep doubled over in his chair with his face near her fingers. Stick went to his own little room and lay on his bed. It felt like he was awake all night.

His father must not have sensed her passing until the next morning. Stick awoke—he'd finally fallen into a fitful sleep—to his father's quavering voice on the telephone as he began making phone calls. Stick walked into his parent's bedroom where his mother still lay. She was paler than he'd ever seen her and completely still. He walked up to her bed and put his fingertips

on her cool cheekbone. The bone crumbled apart inside her skin like a clod of dirt. Stick's fingers would remember that feeling, conjuring it up every time he handled a bag of chips too roughly, or during the summer jobs he would have as a teenager working drywall, or still later during his years of work in the reptile house at the zoo when he'd pick up the brittle skin shed by a snake.

That crumbling still fresh on his fingertips, Stick walked outside into their front yard of dirt and weeds. He wore a patched pair of one of his cousin's jeans, barely long enough and too wide, bunched at the waist with a belt made of rope. He tugged the rope tighter to keep the jeans up. He thought a wasp might come to bob and zip among the nodding yellow heads of the weeds in his dirt yard or that he might find a new spider web in the crook between his small brown adobe house and the plank shed. Instead, he found Spartacus Rex ambling down the street wearing a T-shirt with a bulldog on it and dirty, torn jeans.

"Your dad called my mom and she said I should come over because you'd probably be sad," he said. "Look here." He showed Stick a forked weapon with a dangle of leather and rubber. "Let's go shoot pigeons or toads or something."

Stick stood there feeling numb, staring at the craggy mountains across the city.

"Or cans," Rex said.

Stick nodded.

"Dang," Rex said, but grabbed Stick by the sleeve and hauled him out into the street, down the few blocks to the Rio Grande, where they slid down the steep and crumbling dirt bank of the river gorge in twin avalanches. The river was shallow, like always, a ribbon of brown water that wound through a bed of silt-stitched soil, as fine as sand but shrunken by the sun into a dense clay. Lurking in shady corners of the gorge were patches of quicksand, deceptively far

from the waters, waiting like predators to swallow little boys. Stick and Rex were experts in all the terrain of the river, they could tell which mud was shallow and which would gobble you up. By then they'd spent half a year yelling and leaping down the river gorge slopes and playing among its meandering coils. When Rex wasn't around, Stick had come alone, too, to lie on rocks observing the wildlife: herons, turtles, beavers, a panoply of field mice and drab, grey squirrels; crows that would come and peck at minnows and insects by the water's edge and hawks that would swoop and dip their talons into the water, setting off perfect concentric rings of ripple that would catch the sunlight and send it undulating in every direction, and sometimes come up with a little silvery body; he'd even once seen a coyote, big and shaggy but with tiny feet that knew exactly where to trot.

That day the river was deserted. The air held that crisp chill of the desert winter, a breakable quality, as if to inhale it too deeply, too violently would shatter that pocket of breath into shards within the lungs. Stick and Rex exhaled clouds of steam that floated in the air like spirits, and Stick thought that if a spirit looked like that, to be dead was a sad thing. Even the dense clouds of breath that Rex huffed out pretending he was smoking a cigarette disintegrated a few feet from his mouth, and Stick couldn't help but imagine that his mother's soul must have already faded into nothingness.

Rex picked out round stones, smoothed by a lifetime of the water's current, plugged them in the leather pocket of the slingshot and riddled the river's calm surface with concentric wounds. They scoped the shores for trash, bottles or cans or anything, to set up on a rock and shoot down, but found nothing at all. Rex eyed the few birds that touched down near the water with a hungry leer and Stick was worried he'd try to shoot one.

Then, Rex froze as he stomped along the muddy shore. Stick came over to see. Right in front of Rex the mud was bulging and twitching, as if alive. Rex squatted down and tickled the little spot of struggling mud, no bigger than a quarter, with one of the forked ends of his slingshot. A little creature poked its head through the hole Rex had stabbed into the sand. It was light brown with a wedge-shaped head, muddy antennae, and a craggy, jagged carapace that formed a furrowed ridge of worry over its eyes. It reminded Stick of the ancient sea creature Eurypterid that he'd seen in picture books of the earliest animals on Earth. But Stick had never seen anything like it in real life. It was struggling there, floundering in the mud with its dozen tendril-thin legs. Stick guessed it couldn't breathe, that it'd become stuck there in the mud and was slowly dying.

Rex stared at it, open-mouthed. He had a rock in one hand and the slingshot in the other. Stick squatted beside him, dreading what his best friend might do. Rex finally stood up and scratched his head with the muddy end of the slingshot. "You ever seen anything like this?"

Stick shook his head.

Rex shook his head, too. "It's like we found a monster or something." He frowned down at the creature and then looked at Stick, who, still crouching, was about at eye level. Rex got a pained look on his face and then slipped the slingshot into his back pocket and chucked the rock far out across the river. He leaned out over the bank and cupped muddy water in his hands and dumped it on the animal. Its flailing became more fluid and Stick saw that its body was less than an inch long and that it had a tapered, spiny tail. It was like a cross between a crab and a shrimp. As Rex tossed handfuls and handfuls of water on it, the creature began swimming loops around the small pool that formed. Rex used the butt of his slingshot to carve a canal through the

hardened mud of the shore, deeper and deeper, until a streamlet of water reached from the river to connect with the little pool. He continued rutting out mud, and Stick helped him, pinching the sand into long ridges on either side of the canal until the water running within was deep enough. Then Rex ushered the little creature down the canal with his fingers and, like that, it disappeared into the river's brown waters.

Rex rose to his feet and nodded once at Stick. Stick smiled and rubbed his nose on the back of his hand. "C'mon," Rex said and drew back his slingshot and dry-fired it with a snap that split the frozen air. "Let's go tell my mom to make us some wieners." And the two of them set about climbing the river gorge to where their bikes lay hidden among the weeds. The mountains loomed far across the city, standing vigil over a whole history of dead bodies buried beneath the earth—the history of the world. Behind and below them the river spanned all the way down to Mexico, where Stick vowed to one day go and learn to speak those ancient and tangled names and where there were many gods to watch over the people, not just one.

Chapter 3

The Scrapyard Dream

Stick had never fulfilled that vow. Children's pledges were based on imaginings of how life might one day be. He'd never been to Mexico, and rarely even past the borders of his own state. As Rex marched Stick back across the crunching dirt toward the shack where they'd bivouacked, he laughed at the irony of his childhood promise fulfilled. For that was where they were, stranded in the desert between Albuquerque and the Mexican border, on a journey to commit a terrible wrong.

The land around them was yellow in the star-cast night. "I am a criminal," Stick told a creosote bush, as he and Rex walked. "I am a thief of life," he said to a saltcedar weed, a rake's head planted in the ground.

"Shaddup," Rex said. "You haven't killed anyone. Your head's getting the best of you."

"I am a woman-hater," Stick said to a boulder. "I've betrayed every sick child in New Mexico."

"Your whole life I've had to practically torture you to get you to say a word, and now you won't shut up." Rex poked him in the back with the muzzle of his rifle. "It's just your conscience acting up. Normal. You gotta get past that. In this world, you have to beat your conscience down with a hammer."

Stick had never done anything seriously wrong before. He'd littered. He'd driven over the speed limit. He'd trespassed on private property and reservation land during his solitary camping trips. But he'd never stolen, never hurt anyone on purpose.

Rex walked him into the tiny kitchen in the abandoned shack, lighting the way with a flashlight. He made Stick lean back against the open space beneath the pump sink and handcuffed his wrists to the cast-iron drain pipe. Then he backed up and sat on the small table opposite the sink, tilted his rifle against the wall. “What I’m gonna do is just chain you up until your conscience settles down. We’re still partners. We’re still best friends. We’re still in this thing together. ”

This thing was the blood heist. Rex and the third man, Leon Flowers, had been incanting those two words like a magic spell that would alleviate all of their woes. It had been a simple plan. Blood, like anything else, was a commodity. There was demand for it, a market already in place with distribution systems dominated by entrenched interests, Rex had told him. There were buyers. That was the demand side. And then there was the supply side.

There was nothing immoral, Rex had said, about trading in blood. In other parts of the world, people made money harvesting parts from the dead, to be inserted into living bodies where they would light up again with life. A lung, cold and gray, could begin breathing again inside a new chest. A detached hand could be sewn to the end of a new arm, could again hold a fork, run its fingers through hair, touch the cheek of a lover. Compared to that, blood was easy. People had been trading blood for centuries. It was a business like any other.

“The American Red Cross,” Rex had growled, “are a bunch of crooks. They make money. Why shouldn’t us little guys?”

Rex gathered up the plastic trash bag containing the ice chips and bag of stolen blood. Outside the shack was a whole truck filled with bags of plasma, O-negative, and O-positive. “Me

and Flowers are spending the night in the truck,” Rex said. “To make sure the generator stays on. Maybe after a night here on the floor, you’ll come to your senses. So we can finish this thing.”

When Rex left, the shack was dark, save for the pale glow of stars cast through the window above the sink where Stick lay chained. Outside the generator whined. Crickets keened at one another inside and outside of the clapboard walls. A mouse scuttled down some hidden passageway through the shack’s dilapidated structure. Stick pulled on the drainpipe, but it was welded firm, and so he settled in for a long night on the wooden floor.

When Rex and Flowers first came to Stick with the idea of the blood heist, Stick had dismissed it as nostalgia for their time in the military. He was still a zookeeper back then, content living in his basement apartment with his pet tarantula. Life was tolerable and quiet. He had no need of desperate ploys to steal and sell blood on the black market.

Rex, on the other hand, based his whole existence on such schemes. While Stick was in college earning his biology degree, Rex and Flowers had joined the army and been shipped to Iraq for the first Gulf War. There they’d driven a truck in the borderlands between Kuwait and Iraq, gathering scrap that the American military had deemed tactically important: remnant smart bomb electronics, S.C.U.D. missile casings, armor and engine parts from disabled vehicles, obsolete equipment abandoned by fleeing enemy troops. It was the only time during their lives they had felt a purpose, that their actions seemed to have a higher cause, and when they had completed their tours of duty, they were ejected back into a society that had never had much use for them.

They'd first proposed the blood heist to Stick at The Hole, a dive bar in the part of Albuquerque where the backroads were still unpaved and derelict figures haunted the corners and alleys. It was a bar where the benches were splintered, the wood stained with blood and beer, and where there were no chairs to pitch through windows or clobber someone with. The bartenders were dark, dense men bearing inscrutable tattoos of twisted effigies. In the dirt parking lot sat lines of gray cars. It was a place that didn't seem quite right until night fell black and yellow across its façade of bruised stucco. It was a place where angry men went to tangle out their aggressions and disappointments and betrayals in a creed of futile violence.

They settled themselves in a corner at a square table, Rex with his back to the wall, Stick across from him, and Flowers between them. Flowers, who Rex and Stick had known since grade school, was a chubby man with red cheeks who drove an ice cream truck and found glee in almost everything. He sold push-up pops, ice cream sandwiches, fudgesicles, bomb-pops, cigarettes, condoms, mini-bottles of Bicardi, Jack Daniels, and Smirnoff, stink bombs, fireworks, spray paint, rubber cement, edible underwear, porno magazines, porno tapes and DVDs, brass knuckles, switchblades, and every now and then the occasional soft drug. Flowers tied balloon animals for kids' birthday parties and could hook you up with a stripper.

A waitress with a young figure and the bags of an old woman beneath her eyes brought them a round of shots and mugs of beer. When they had downed the acrid whiskey and chased it with beer, Rex sucked the foam from his mustache and leaned across the table to relate his vision. "We have a chance to live a dream, Stick. Me and Flowers have a plan that'll solve our money problems forever. No more working for shithead bosses. No more nine-to-five."

"I'm living my dream," Stick said.

“At the zoo?” Rex asked. “Feeding cockroaches to spiders and going home to that dungeon you live in?” Rex grunted. “I’m talking here about a business of our own. I’m talking about a *scrapyard*.”

“Scrapyard,” Flowers echoed under his breath..

“This state’s full of scrap,” Rex continued. “Hell, the whole country is. If we had the money, we could buy a used garbage truck.”

“One with a winch!” Flowers piped.

“Right, a winch. To lift the heavier stuff.”

“To lift!” Flowers said.

Rex glowered at the clown from beneath his grey eyebrows. “Do you want to tell it?”

“No, no,” Flowers said. “I like it when you tell it. I’ll be quiet.” He sat back and covered his mouth with both hands.

Rex’s brow relaxed as he unfolded his dream. “We’ll clean up the truck. Hose it down with acid soap. We’ll re-paint it.”

“Just like in the corps!” Flowers said through a crack in his fingers.

“Right,” Rex said. “We’ll paint a naked lady on it, or an eagle, or something. We’ll rent a yard to keep it in down in Socorro, right on the border. We’ll sort the scrap and sell the choicest stuff here in the States, and the rest across the border in Mexico. They’re desperate for scrap down there. They love it. Our trash is their treasure. We throw away good stuff—perfectly useful stuff—all the time. The Mexicans need it. It’s like that hippie recycling shit, except for real people with real stuff. And there’s no taxes on it, because of NAFTA. We can sell it and keep all the profits. Free unlimited supply, no taxes, huge demand. It’s genius.”

Stick leaned back in his chair. This was exactly the kind of enterprise that Flowers and Rex would never be able to hold together. It would take years of work, dedication, and overtime to build up a profitable scrap yard. Neither of them was up to it. They weren't the sorts that had the patience to dedicate themselves to anything. "Scrap yard," he said. "Doesn't sound like me."

Rex poked a finger into Stick's chest. "It's *exactly* you," he said in the fierce whisper he used to intimidate people. "You're just the person we need. You'll tend to the yard. Categorize, sort, take care of the stuff. It'll be just like working in the zoo."

"Except no need to feed anything," Flowers said.

"Much easier than having to feed everything all the time," Rex said.

Stick shook his head. Feeding those animals were the most joyous moments of his days.

"All we need is the starting up money," Rex said.

"Which is why we steal the blood," Flowers chirped.

Rex glared at him.

"Oops," Flowers said.

"Didn't I tell you," Rex growled at him, "to ease into that part?"

"Sorry," said the grinning clown.

"Can't you ever just stick to the plan and let me handle things the right way?"

Flowers hung his head. "I just get so excited."

"What is this," Stick rumbled, "about stealing blood?"

Rex took a deep breath, swelling his thin chest. "There's a war on," he growled.

"I'm aware of that," Stick said.

“I don’t think you are,” Rex said. “Sure, you know about Iraq and Afghanistan. But there’s another war, south of the border.”

Stick sighed. “I’ve heard of that one, too.” The news spilled across the radio channels every day, the street-shootings, the political assassinations, the bombs detonating in border towns. All fallout from a decades-old drug war that spanned from Columbia to Canada, and remnants of older wars between nations, ethnicities, imperial powers. Stick’s father was Chicano; his mother had been part white and part Navajo. But Stick, treated like an outsider by every creed and race because of his gigantism, felt removed from that history, save for the anonymous sorrow he felt for any stranger’s hardship.

“It’s just like after 9/11,” Rex said. “During national tragedies, the need rises. Blood goes bad after a week. You can’t stockpile it. When blood’s being spilled, the demand goes up. That means the *price* goes up. Down in Mexico, drug cartels are paying premium dollar for blood. They don’t have access to regular hospitals. Plasma’s as precious as crude.”

“And what is your plan for getting blood to sell in Mexico?” Stick asked. “You’re going to steal it?”

“It’s a victimless crime,” Rex said. “We knock off a blood bank.”

“It’s not like we’re taking the blood out of people by force,” Flowers chimed in. “They’re *volunteers*. They want to give it away.”

“That is,” Stick said, sipping down the last of his beer, “the worst logic I have ever heard. Even from you.”

Rex glared at him across the table. “It’s totally logical. Totally sound. We’ve got a contact in Mexico—”

“My contact!” said Flowers.

“That’s right. Flowers found a contact to fence the stuff across the border. We’ll convert his ice cream truck, refrigerate the whole damned thing. It’ll be an icebox on wheels. We’ll have back-up stocks of ice and a separate generator. Five hours to Mexico, drop the stuff off, maybe spend the night celebrating in Juarez.”

“With girls,” Flowers said. “Don’t forget about the girls.”

“It sounds like,” Stick said, laying a five dollar bill on the table and rising, “you have it all planned out.” The scrap yard, stealing blood and selling it in Mexico—Stick knew these pipe-dreams would never come to pass. Flowers would keep selling ice cream and twisting balloons into poodles at children’s birthday parties. Rex would keep working security at concerts, bouncing at dance clubs downtown, doing odd painter’s work. And Stick would stay where he belonged, in the Reptile House at the Albuquerque Zoo.

Rex said nothing as Stick headed for the door. But Stick could feel the angry gaze Rex fixed on his back, a gaze that, Stick knew, was a mask for the hurt and hopelessness that plagued his adult life. They’d grown up in the same neighborhood, both poor, playing on the banks of the same river. They’d gone through the same elementary and middle schools, been spurned by the same cliques in high school, had crushes on some of the same high-and-mighty girls. Yet Stick had a solid, comfortable life, and Rex scabbled every month for rent. Stick had a college degree and a profession. And Rex, at thirty-eight, had virtually nothing to show for his years.

Chapter 4

How to Catch a Brown Recluse

Despite Stick's initial reaction to the idea of the blood heist, there he was, chained to a sink, halfway to Mexico. There was spilled blood on Stick's trousers. The generator hummed in the truck outside the shack. Pouches of Capri Sun lay drained on the small table across from where Stick lay shackled. Beetles scavenged the crumbs of cookies spilled across the floor—Capri Sun and cookies that Flowers had stolen from the blood bank. Stick had spent the night chained beneath the sink, unable to sit up because there was nothing to lean against, below the sink just a gaping cavity that reeked of mouse droppings and dank water remnants and emitted a draft of cold desert night. And though the surrounding land was dry for miles of scrub desert, mountains, and mesas, Stick's ears had thrummed all night with mosquitoes. They'd probably coiled up from some well dug nearby. His neck was stippled with bites. It was as if they sensed the veritable ocean of blood in the back of the truck and been drawn from some hidden place in search of it.

The shack, long abandoned, was a wild place. Mice scuttled inside of the walls. The wooden floors ticked with the chitinous footsteps of beetles. Crickets chirped in every direction. Chicks cried from the nest of an egret or hawk built into one of the eaves. The space beneath the floor was the perfect home for a rattle or garter snake. And, in a corner of the kitchen where the walls and floor met, in the gap between a dented and rusty mini-fridge and the wall, and spun into the spokes of a stool in the one other room of the shack, gleamed the lopsided webs of

brown recluse lairs. Brown recluses were the most deadly spider in North America. The shack was crawling with them.

An hour after the sun cast its light through the window above the sink, a door to the truck opened and slammed. Someone clomped toward the house. Rex emerged through the door to the kitchen, his mustache greasy and drooping, his eyes bloodshot. He carried a handful of Capri Sun drink pouches, a plastic bag of crumbling cookies.

“Morning,” Rex grumbled. He slung the bag of cookies on the table with a clunk, and tossed the bags of drink beside them. He peered into a scuffed rear-view mirror nailed to the wall beside the table. It was rectangular, probably from an old pickup truck. “Good Christ, I look terrible.” He squinted at himself, opened his eyes wide and narrowed them again, grimaced as he peered at his teeth. He turned to look down at Stick. “You don’t look so good yourself.”

Stick’s arms quivered from the stress of either suspending them to ease the cut of the manacles, or letting them hang by the wrist, which numbed them until his hands felt like dead things. “I have to take a leak,” he said.

Rex nodded. “Soon as Flowers is up, we’ll unchain you.”

“Why not now? I’m too weak to try anything.”

Rex snorted. “Right. You’re the strongest sonnofabitch I’ve ever met. Even if your night was anything near as bad as mine—and it looks like it was—I’m still not letting you go until I’ve got Flowers’s gun on you.”

“I’m a peaceful man.”

Rex raised one of his bushy gray eyebrows. “Yesterday you tried to strangle Flowers. Yeah, you’re a real peaceful guy.”

“Flowers,” Stick said, “was asking for it.”

“No argument there.” Rex picked up a Capri Sun. “Drink?”

Stick sighed. “Sure.”

Rex skinned the plastic blue straw of its wrapper and jabbed it at the sleek torso of the drink pouch. “These things are hard.” The straw slid over the little foil hole again and again without purchase, until finally Rex jammed it so hard that the straw bent in half. He pitched the straw into the sink and drew his bowie knife from the scabbard on his belt. “I don’t know how kids are supposed to be able to work these things.” He set the pouch on the table, held it still with one hand and scalped its top clean off. Keeping the knife drawn, he crept close to Stick and placed the pouch in Stick’s grasping hands. Stick held it to his lips, spilling several drops from his shaking muscles, and took it down in one long gulp. After a night of agony, it was an icy, sugary delight.

Rex cut his own pouch open and chugged it. He held up the bag of crumbling cookies and jounced it in the air. “Cookie?”

Stick shook his head. “I don’t like cookies.”

“Only thing we’ve got,” Rex said and crunched into one. It turned half to dust, spilling down his shirt.

The door of the truck opened and slammed. Feet trudged across the yard of dirt and grit and a bedraggled Flowers emerged into the kitchen. He was still dressed in his clown outfit, part of their ruse to slip past customs, his makeup smeared into a nightmare mask of red, white, and green. His silver pistol hung in the elastic waistband of his white clown pants. The fake daisy in

his lapel hung as if the plastic had wilted. His lips were swollen with sores, one of them drizzling red onto his chin.

“Jesus,” Flowers said. “Nightmare out in that truck.”

Rex was cutting the top from the last pair of Capri Suns.

“Ooo! Drink!” Flowers extended both hands toward the pouches. “Gimme.”

“Get your own,” Rex growled. “These are for me and the prisoner.”

Flowers had stepped within a couple feet of Stick, the fat silver pistol right at the level of his hands. If the clown came close enough, Stick could probably get hold of it.

“Get your eyes off my jewels,” Flowers ordered him and kicked him in the foot. A drop of blood fell onto his big belly. He turned to Rex. “Guy’s staring at my nuts.”

“He’s looking at your gun, idiot,” Rex said.

“Hey! Don’t call—” A new trickle of blood sprayed from his lips. “Dang! What’s going on with my lips?” He pressed a palm to them and held it up to examine the red imprint of a kiss painted on his skin.

“A bug bit your lips in your sleep,” Rex told him. “Looked like a mix between a cockroach and a spider. I chased it away.”

“I didn’t sleep. Did I sleep?”

“You were snoring for practically the whole night,” Rex said. “You didn’t even wake up when that, whatever it was, was chewing on you.”

“Doesn’t feel like a slept a wink,” Flowers said. “Mosquitoes were flying in through the vents of the cab. I got out to take a piss and I swear I got buzzed by a thousand of them! Looked

down at my hands and it was like they were hairy with mosquitoes. Like two heads of mosquito hair on each hand. They even went after my johnson.”

The insect that had bit Flowers on the lips was most likely an assassin bug, a hematophagous insect that injected anti-coagulate agents into the wounds it inflicted to keep the blood flowing. That was why Flowers’s lips would’t stop bleeding. Assassin bugs attacked animals in their sleep, biting the lips, the tongue, the lids of the eyes. Stick had cared for various types of them at the zoo.

“Fucking terrifying having a swarm of mosquitoes on your junk,” Flowers said, reaching into the bag for a cookie. When he bit, a crust of crumbs speckled his lips. The missing crescent of the cookie was edged in red. “Yummy!” he said.

“You gonna go see if you can’t find us some help, or what?” Rex said to Flowers.

“Yeah,” said Flowers through a mouthful of gummy cookie. “Guess I’ll head out and see if I can’t steal a pickup truck or hitch a ride into Roswell or something. Rent us a van and a whole bunch of ice. I still don’t know how we’re gonna keep that much blood cold without a refrigerated van.”

Rex’s voice was tight with irritation. “I told you, we ditch whatever regular blood won’t fit and just take the plasma. That’s the valuable merchandise anyway. We shouldn’t have taken so much regular blood in the first place.”

Flowers’s chest heaved. His face reddened through the smear of white makeup. “And I told you, it’s stupid to leave perfectly good merchandise behind when we have a whole truck’s worth of space. It’s like throwing away money!”

Rex stood up from the table and yelled in Flowers's face. "All that blood is probably what broke us down! Too much weight!"

"My truck could carry a damned elephant!" Flowers yelled back. "It's an industrial vehicle!"

"Maybe it could if you hadn't been driving like a crazy person," Rex said. "This whole disaster is because you're a fat greedy bastard, and you always have been. Ever since Gulf War One when I saved your sorry ass!"

"That falafel would have been perfectly good to eat! It was fresh and it smelled great!"

"You don't eat at street vendors," Rex bellowed. "That's what our training taught us. No running water, no eat. Why was that so hard to understand?"

This was an old argument that Stick had heard a hundred times. In Kuwait, Flowers and another soldier in their unit had bought falafel from a street stall. Rex forced Flowers to throw his away. The other marine died a few days later of dysentery.

For a moment Stick thought the two of them might just be on edge enough to come to blows, maybe giving him the opportunity he needed to get his hands on Flowers's gun. But instead Flowers just curled his bloody lips at Rex and said, "The problem wasn't my truck. It was your friend." He turned to look down at Stick. "Who is a bastard?"

Rex sipped his drink pouch and sighed. "That he is. A traitorous bastard."

"Bros before hoes," Flowers said to Stick. "Ever heard that expression?"

"That's not a real expression," Stick said.

"What do you call it, then?" Flowers asked.

"Knock it off." Rex turned to Flowers. "You're going to find us transportation, right?"

“That’s my department,” affirmed Flowers.

“We’re counting on you.”

“I won’t let you down!” Flowers chirped, and off he went. Outside, the back doors of the ice cream truck opened and slammed—he was probably collecting a stash of Capri Suns for the road—and then his footsteps crunched off through the dirt.

By dusk, Flowers was still missing. Rex and Stick had spent the day playing poker on the kitchen floor, Stick clasping his cards close to his face in both restrained hands, pitching his discards at Rex as best he could. He moved his wrists as little as possible to try to keep the chains from chafing his skin. They blew and swatted at mosquitoes. Horseflies bobbed and batted at the shack’s window. At noon they ate some oatmeal raisin cookies and sucked down a few pouches each of Carpi Sun.

As the sun sank, a cool evening wind kicked up through the shack. Spartacus Rex went around closing the kitchen windows. “Well, old pal, I’m going out to guard the truck. Good luck fighting off all the blood-suckers,” he said.

“How about unlocking one of my hands?” Stick asked.

Rex laughed. “You’re lucky I don’t chain up your feet. Goodnight.” He turned and left, shutting the door of the shack behind him.

Stick waited until the cab door of the truck opened and closed. The generator powering the truck’s refrigeration system was still humming. He wondered how much gas they had left for it. Once Rex had settled in, Stick fished an empty Capri Sun pouch from his shirtfront. He lifted a flimsy plastic straw from his shirt pocket with his teeth. Contraband. He held the pouch in his chained-up hands, kept the straw between his lips.

Brown recluses didn't just wait around for prey to fall into their web. They were hunters. That was why their webs were dense and small—they were built as shelter, not as nets. At night they left their webs to stalk and kill prey. And one of their favorite prey were nice, juicy crickets, of which Stick had heard plenty the night before.

Stick mashed the Capri Sun pouch as flat as he could between his palms, squeezing the remaining liquid to the very top of the pouch. He then tilted it over, dribbling a line of artificially flavored fruit punch onto the tile of the kitchen floor. Hiking up the leg of his jeans with a foot, he rubbed his bare knee over the dribbles, smoothing out a plane of liquid that would dry into a sticky, aromatic trap. Then Stick positioned his knee a few inches above the sticky patch, ready to bonk whatever hapless cricket or cockroach was enticed by it.

It took what felt like an hour of waiting, as still as he could be, breathing slowly and deeply, before the first cricket hopped out of the shadows. It took another quarter hour at least until the insect bounced across the tile to Stick's trap. When it finally stopped there at the edge of the sugary patch, Stick waited until it had settled to lick before he brought his knee down. He didn't hit to kill, just to stun. Stick lifted his knee. The cricket lay on its back, one leg twitching.

Stick leaned his torso and head down, straining against his sore wrists, straw in lips. He butted the tip of the straw up to the cricket's body and sucked the insect up against the aperture. Stick straightened up slowly, maintaining gentle suction on the animal to prevent it from falling, but without hurting it. Its antennae waved madly, and its long back legs kicked at empty air. When he'd straightened, Stick grasped the cricket in his fingers. Then, with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, he carefully crushed each one of its legs. When the little beast was immobilized he dropped it into the Capri Sun pouch, clasped between his pinkie and ring finger.

The slick walls of the drink pouch would prevent it from pushing itself anywhere with its broken legs. Those walls were also slick enough to prevent a brown recluse, tantalized by the scent of cricket juice leaking out of leg wounds, from climbing back out once it was inside.

He leaned the drink pouch, mouth-up and at a slant, against the base of the wall so that any spider that came along could climb the wall to access it. Then he extended his body full length across the floor, reached with his foot and knocked Spartacus Rex's deodorant stick from the tabletop. It clattered to the floor. Stick scooted it toward his body with his foot until it was close enough for him to pick up between his teeth and bring to his hands. He pulled the top off the deodorant and, using the tip of the straw, hollowed out a little den in the product where he could dump a brown recluse spider.

Chapter 5

Cry

Stick fell in love for the first time when he was thirty-seven, almost a year before the blood heist. He found her in the cool shadows of the Reptile House, where he worked as a keeper of invertebrates, amphibians, and reptiles.

He'd been called away from the House to identify a snake brought in by a father and daughter—a western terrestrial garter snake, a big one, but not dangerous. People often brought in captured snakes for identification and to see if the zoo wanted to add their catch to the animals on exhibition. Mostly, they were just put in cages, which every week or so were loaded onto a truck and released near the river south of the city.

Stick stepped into the Reptile House, letting the cool air wash over him and relishing the dim light. The lighting was low to minimize reflections on the outside of the terrariums housing the animals. Simultaneously, the light inside most of the terrariums was brighter, meaning that the animals saw mainly reflections of their homes in the glass and perceived the humans peeping in at them as vague shadows beyond their mirrored world. To compliment its dim lighting, the interior of the building was designed to look like a cave, with dark, rough ceilings and walls of stone simulated through plaster. The fake cave walls were mainly for children, but the closeness and darkness, Stick imagined, made the animals feel more secure.

As he entered, Stick spotted a wheelchair two rooms distant. Walking closer, Stick couldn't tell whether the person in the wheelchair was a man or a woman. A thin neck and narrow head with short hair, barely beyond bristle, rose above the square back of the chair. Stick

tried to keep his eyes on the floor as he made his way beneath the two doorways and around the back of the wheelchair. He was headed to the entrance to the back of the House, a door hidden in a fold of cave wall, when a woman's voice croaked up at him. "Excuse me."

Stick had loped past, was already sorting through his dozens of keys for the right one to his secret door. "Yes?" he asked quietly. It wasn't Stick's job to interact with the public.

"I think one of your subjects has escaped." She was not over forty, but with the cracked voice of an old woman. Her pale skin stretched over clavicles, elbows, cheekbones. Her skin, from fingers to forehead, was riddled with pink scars, some no bigger than pinpricks, others an inch across. She wore black boots and a skirt. Her legs looked a little better, thin but shapely, and without the wounds on her upper body and face.

Too stunned to speak, Stick eclipsed her entire body by tilting down the bill of his Albuquerque Zoo cap. It was Cryopathria, Rex's younger sister, who'd run away from home twenty years before and who neither he nor Rex had seen again.

"See?" she said and pointed toward the terrarium of the Natterjack Toads, Jack and Jackie. There on the ridge in front of the display was a black wolf spider, broad and hairy, but no bigger than Stick's pinky nail. It was a wild spider, not one of his.

Stick bent down and tickled the spider with an index finger into his palm. He could feel it, alert and vibrating, against his callouses. He turned back to her. Her face was devastating. It was the same hourglass shape and beautiful, shallow-set green eyes, but scarred by pinches and pockmarks. One eye squinted slightly, tightened by the heavy scar that mauled her eyebrow and cheekbone.

“I know you,” she rasped in her broken voice. She had a long, lateral scar across her throat. She seemed about to say more, but cut herself off. She knew him for his height, as everyone did, but had censored herself out of politeness.

“You’re Cry,” he said. “Rex’s little sister.”

“And you’re John.”

“People still call me Stick.”

“Because of my brother.” Cry shook her head. “That bastard.”

Stick looked down at his shoes and reached under his cap to scratch his head.

“You’re still hanging around him, aren’t you,” she said.

“He’s,” Stick said and sighed “my friend. Friends are hard to find.”

“I’d rather have no friends.” Her voice was thin and bitter. Rex had been a bully, but she was probably thinking more about her father, a drunk, who threw bottles at cats, who treated his wife like a servant, who hit his children. Stick had half-grown up in that household, a witness to its constant violence. “But Spartacus was better to you than he was to me.”

Stick stood there in silence, not knowing what words to use to pry back the distance on the years since they’d seen each other. As a child, he thought her the most beautiful girl in the city. Now, faced with that same Cry living in a wrecked body, he felt his childhood crush fuse with a sense that this was what he knew how to do: care for something helpless.

“If there’s anything I can do for you,” he began.

“I’m fine,” Cry snapped. Stick flinched and she must have noticed because her voice became softer. “I’m here with a volunteer. They bring us out once a week from the hospital to cheer us up.”

Stick wanted more than anything to ask her what had happened to her. Instead he swallowed and asked, “Does it work?”

Cry laughed. “Sometimes.” She smiled faintly up at him. “Today it helped.”

“Then come back.”

As she rolled toward the exit, with stiff jerks of her arms, she looked over her shoulder and said, “Don’t tell Rex you saw me.”

Stick nodded, knowing it was a promise he’d have to work very hard to keep.

Stick had seen Cry’s father hit his children and his wife. Throughout their childhood, Rex wore bruises on his ribs like a second skin. But their father could also be charming and affectionate. He played both the good cop and the bad cop, and from one minute to the next it was impossible to tell which you’d be up against.

The day Stick had first met Rex’s family was a freezing and windy. “C’mon,” Rex said, “We’re going to my house. My mom will make us some wieners and we can play guns.” Though in first grade, Stick had never played guns. His mother didn’t let him have toy guns. When his uncle had bought him a plastic cowboy gun, she’d thrown it away before he could touch it.

Rex’s house was an adobe like Stick’s, but the yard was crammed with junk: two rusted old cars with no wheels and missing doors and smashed rear-ends and busted taillights; stacks of firewood collapsed onto their sides and growing weeds and spider webs; odd piles of roof shingles, machine parts, old rotten clothes, assortments of crumbling bricks, metal and plastic piping, big sheets of aluminum, dog toys, trash bags bursting with garbage, and a stray pink dress that looked almost new amidst the squalor. They went around the back and Stick got to take a

real close look at one of the spider webs on the way and he hoped the creature that quivered there in the gleaming web was a black widow or brown recluse, but it was probably just an orb weaver.

Rex led them up two cement steps, banged open a screen door that screeched on its hinges and then they were in his kitchen. There was a yellow refrigerator, a table with green-backed metal chairs that spilled stuffing, and a sink filled with dirty dishes. There were the paw prints of some big dog across the floor. At the table sat an older boy who had Rex's jaw, darker hair, and the faint spread of a bruise on his cheek, blue and purple like the wing of a dragonfly. A big man shaped like a gorilla stood leaning against the sink. He had black hair and a thick black beard and his hair was just as thick on his forearms.

"This is my pop." Rex said. "And that's my brother Luke." The boy with the bruise nodded at Stick.

"What're you doing here?" the man said to Rex. "Didn't I tell you to play outside in the afternoons?"

Rex squared his tiny body up to face his huge pop, his arms folded across his chest. "This here's my new best friend, see? It's cold, so we're coming inside to play. His name's Stick and he's the biggest kid in school."

"Which school? High school?" his pop asked. Stick could tell he was kidding but Rex just got madder.

"He's a first grader like me and we've got lots of friends," Rex said, which wasn't true. It was just the two of them every day. "We came home because we can do whatever we want. Where's mom? We want wieners. In buns."

"Say hot dogs," said Luke from the table. His voice was soft and sad.

“Ha. You’re not getting wieners,” his pop said.

“We’re asking mom, then,” Rex said.

“Go ahead and try,” his pop said and seemed to get bored with bullying Rex because he turned to look out the grimy window over the sink.

Rex’s mom walked into the kitchen in slippers and a faded blue robe over a yellow dress. She was pale with huge green eyes and her head was wrapped up in a brown scarf. A little girl—who Stick found out was named Cryopathria—toddled after her, clinging to the hem of the robe. Rex’s mom yelled at Brutus in a language made out of rocky and swooping sounds, which wasn’t Spanish. Rex later told Stick it was Romanian, and that his mom wasn’t allowed to speak it in the house. She kept pointing at the dishes.

“English, woman!” Rex’s pop yelled back.

Cry released the hem of robe and staggered beneath the kitchen table where she got hold of Luke’s knees. Her face glowered at everything around her, as if she were already a grown up.

“The dishes!” the woman said and threw up her hands. She had a deep, thick voice and she was the prettiest mom Stick had ever seen.

Rex’s dad grinned at her. “That’s better,” he said.

“Hey mom,” Rex said, tugging at her robe, “me and my best friend want some wieners.”

“Say hot dogs,” said Luke as he patted the little girl’s head.

“Soup,” Rex’s mom said. “On a cold day you eat soup,” and she began banging around pots and ladles and bowls and knives and spoons.

“We want wieners,” Rex growled.

“This is America,” his dad said. “Make ‘em some sandwiches.”

“I have soup on,” Rex’s mom said. “It’s afternoon. Hot soup.”

Rex’s dad was looking out the window again and he said suddenly, “Looks like old lady Ramirez has a new cat hanging around.”

“Another!” Rex’s mom said. “So many cats.”

“Spartacus! You wanna learn to trap cats?” the man asked.

“Heck yeah!” Rex said, beaming up at him.

“Cat!” the little girl piped and her glower cleared into a beautiful smile beneath her green eyes.

Rex’s mom rolled her eyes at Luke and Luke shook his head.

“I’ll show you how to do it after you and your friend have some soup,” Rex’s dad said.

“Alriiiiight!” Rex yelled and whooped with joy.

“Cat!” said Cry.

But Rex’s pop never taught them to trap cats, even though they went to his house almost every week from then on. Sometimes Brutus was too busy with sports shows, or rolling cigarettes—which he *did* teach the boys how to do—or hucking empty beer cans on top of old lady Ramirez’s roof or at her colony of cats that yowled and prowled and fought and came over to rub against the boys’ legs as they clambered around the jungle-gym of junk in Rex’s yard. Other times, Rex and Stick would sneak up to the house, where Rex would crouch and listen. When there were shouts and things banging around, Rex would march inside. When it was quiet, they’d sneak away and find some other place to spend the afternoon. Quiet at Rex’s house was always dangerous.

Brutus was cruel and kind to everyone in the Rex family. But as they got older, Stick noticed that he had a special eye for Cry.

One day when the boys were freshmen in high school, Rex talked his father into driving him and Stick to the dollar movies. He agreed, but said they had to pick up Cry first and take her to ballet. They pulled up outside of Cry's school at 3:00 as all the middle school kids poured out, the girls in their tube tops and leg-warmers and styled bangs that stood high like the shields of bone on Triceratops. The boys wore Metal shirts and acid wash jeans rolled up at the ankle. Cry came walking out from the buildings in a long skirt and her hair in a ponytail on the side of her head. She was bookended with two girlfriends and when she saw the car idling at the curb, she stopped walking. One of the girls whispered at Cry behind her hand. The other clung to her elbow.

Brutus honked.

Rex was talking about the movie they were going to see. "It has jets," he was telling Stick. "They shoot down commies."

"C'mon," Brutus growled and honked again.

The three girls stood in a knot a hundred feet from the car. Other students streamed around them, piled onto buses, jumping into the cars of parents, setting off down the sidewalks.

"F-16's," Rex said. "They get launched from aircraft carriers and they fight for America."

Cry finally separated from her girlfriends, who stood there frowning at the car. Cry spoke to Brutus through the front seat window. "I told you."

"Get in," Brutus said. "It's Tuesday."

"Get in, already!" Rex yelled at her.

“Hi Cry,” Stick mumbled and no one heard him above the magpie chatter of students all around, the rumble of the engine, the father, son, and daughter who were accustomed to yelling.

“I’m not going,” Cry said. She glared at Brutus, hugging her books to her chest.

“You’re going,” Brutus said.

“I told you,” she said. “I don’t want to go anymore. I don’t even have my shoes or my leotard.”

Brutus grinned at her through his big black beard. “I brought em’.” He held up a brown grocery sack. “See how your papa loves you? He brings your ballet clothes even when you forget.”

“I didn’t forget.” She looked over both shoulders. “I’m going over to Naomi’s.”

Brutus shook his head. “You’re getting into this car.”

Rex threw his head back and groaned. “Just decide already. Stick and me are gonna miss the previews.”

“I didn’t pay for those ballet lessons for you to not even show up,” Brutus said.

“The lessons are free,” Cry said.

Brutus set the grocery sack on the passenger seat, “I bought you all these clothes. Did I buy them for nothing?”

Cry stood outside, leaning over, clasping her books to her chest. Her eyes welled up as she stared at the grocery bag.

“C’mon,” Brutus said. “You like dancing. You’re dancing all the time all over the fuckin’ house. You spin around till you break a vase the other day and your mother blows a gasket, and now you tell me you’re not going to dance class.”

She stared at the bag and didn't move.

"Get in," Brutus said. "You can change in the car."

"Just get in," Rex moaned.

Cry opened the door and slid her body into the seat, jamming the crinkling sack up against the gear shift. Brutus picked it up and put it in her lap. "Go ahead, get ready," he said. "You're going to be late." He pulled out into traffic and Cry sat with her head down.

"Buckle up," Rex told her. She didn't move.

The Community Center where she took dance lessons was only a few blocks away. Cry sat still the whole time, without buckling her seatbelt or changing into her ballet clothes or even looking around. Rex rattled away about fighter jets and killing commies. Brutus drove the car and stole looks at Cry sitting silently.

They pulled up and Brutus said, "You're welcome, honey."

Cry got out of the car and held the paper sack with her books in her arms. She plodded through the front doors, the other children bouncing past in their tutus and whirling their toe shoes above their heads by the straps.

"That girl," Brutus said, grinning after her. "She looks more like her mother every day."

Cry returned to the zoo a week after their first meeting. Stick was standing on a stepladder touching up the trim around the east door of the Reptile House. Though his impulse was to finish jobs in the public areas of the zoo quickly—children tended to stare and point at him as if he were another animal specimen on display—he forced himself to paint carefully and thoroughly.

As he dipped his paint in the bucket, Cry was there looking at up him. The morning sun had turned her eyes emerald and drew sharp shadows across the planes of her face. She looked like she'd emerged from underground, starved and pale.

"You're back," Stick said. He'd spent the week thinking that he'd never see her again.

"I came back to see if you kept your promise." Her voice was as cracked and dry as skin shed from a snake.

Stick knew which promise she meant and he nodded. It wasn't hard to keep things from Rex in the short term because he took so little interest in Stick's day-to-day life. "Are you here alone?" he asked.

"No," Cry said. "My volunteer is afraid of snakes. She refuses to go inside." Cry turned and waved to a blond woman in a sundress and designer sunglasses who stood chatting on a cell phone near the ice cream stand. The woman waved back manically. "She's obsessed with me," Cry said. "She's convinced that if she's optimistic enough my scars will disappear and I'll walk again."

Stick chuckled and two drops of bright green paint dribbled onto the toe of his work boot.

"But you and I know that scars are only on the surface, and that the real problems are much deeper and older than that. Don't we, John?"

"Yes," he said. "I guess we do."

"You don't want to talk about it," she said.

"I guess I don't," Stick said.

"Then you're part of the problem," Cry said. In her wheelchair at the foot of his stepladder her head barely came up to his ankle. Stick dipped his brush in the gallon paint bucket

clasped in his left palm and took a couple of very slow strokes at the trim, smoothing the paint into a uniform texture. Then he stepped carefully down, set the bucket on the ground in the shelter of the ladder and lay the brush across the bucket's mouth.

Cry watched him. When he'd finished she said. "Being quiet about something doesn't make it go away. You have to talk about it."

"I don't talk very much," Stick admitted. "But I am a very good listener."

Cry seemed to try to make herself smile. "Do you like to talk about animals?"

"Sometimes," Stick said.

"Well, why don't you wheel me around inside and tell me about your favorite reptile?"

Stick walked around her chair and took the handles in his fists. "My favorite animal in there is not a reptile," he said. "It's a spider."

"I'm a little scared of spiders," Cry admitted as Stick punched the handicapped door buttons and wheeled her forward through the double doors. He skipped the first room altogether and went straight for the second where his favorite spider lived. Saying he had a favorite wasn't exactly true, for after a decade and a half of working for pay and nearly ten years of volunteer work before that, Stick thought of the creatures in the Reptile House as his children. But if a father had a child he was especially proud of, Stick's would be the Bird-Eater Goliath.

"Oh my God," Cry gasped as Stick wheeled her to the terrarium where the Goliath lived. Her fur was a deep brown that darkened to black at the hair-tips. Crouched beneath the green, pink, and yellow fronds of a bromeliad, she was nearly a foot across and her fangs, when exposed, were an inch long.

"This is the biggest spider in the world," Stick said.

“It’s the scariest thing I’ve ever seen!” she said and shivered. To her credit, though, she didn’t scream or squeak or turn away, but simply stared at the magnificent animal.

“They’re not harmful to humans,” Stick told her. “The worst they can do is throw their barbed hairs. They hook in you and irritate the skin.”

“It’s amazing,” Cry said and turned to Stick, his hand clasping the handle of her wheelchair. “It’s as big as your palm,” she said. “Only hairy.”

“And it’s got eight fingers,” Stick said.

“Right,” Cry said. “I guess it’s not like your hand at all.”

Stick put his hand in his pocket, embarrassed at its size. Cry seemed to sense his discomfort. A light blush rose up through her casement of facial scars. She turned back to the terrarium. “What does it eat?” she asked.

“Insects. Lizards. Mice.”

“Birds?”

“Very rarely,” he said.

Cry sat with her thin arms in her lap and her back hunched, and looked very little like the dervish of a girl she’d once been, always in motion, dancing when she was happy, stamping around the house when she wasn’t. This damaged woman barely resembled her at all, and then she turned to look up at Stick and he found her again in those dark green eyes.

“Does it have a name?” she asked.

“Goliath,” Stick said. “Not very original, I know.” They had so many animals that most of them ended up with names very close to their species’ name or names based on what they looked like. The natterjack toads were Jack and Jackie. The reticulated python was Tic. The

bright green Carolina anole was Greenie. For a brief time a young woman with a knack for naming things had worked at the House. She'd burned out early, not fit for the stolid meticulousness that the job required, but her legacy lived on in the few names she'd doled out: George Burns the box turtle, Feather the 16-foot long boa constrictor, Turncoat the chameleon.

Cry laughed. "At least it fits him."

The spider was female, but Stick didn't bother to point that out. "Do you want to see the rest of the animals?" he asked.

"Yes," Cry said.

And even though the can of green paint was drying in the heat and sun, and the ladder itself was precarious, he took her from room to room, answering her questions. At the end of the tour, as he wheeled her back out into the blinding glare of day, she put her slender hand on his.

"It's nice to see you again, John," she said. "You were always so gentle and sweet."

Stick looked down at the two dots of green on his boot. "It's nice to see you, too. I never thought I would."

"I'm out of the hospital tomorrow," she said.

"That's good," Stick said.

"Yeah. Going back home."

Stick looked up. "Home?" And he thought of the house with the ramshackle siding, the piles of junk, and the gorilla-shaped man, her father. He wondered if she even knew that her father was dead.

Cry laughed. "No, not that home. I don't even think of that as home anymore. I have a new home now."

“Oh,” Stick said. “Does that mean no more zoo visits?”

“Not official ones.”

Far away an elephant trumpeted. A peacock shrieked. “Next week,” Stick said, “maybe you’d like to go to the aquarium. They have the best eel exhibit in the country.” On his days off he sometimes volunteered there, unloading crates, feeding the sea turtles, cleaning tank filters.

“I’d like to,” Cry said and Stick discovered that the scars on her cheeks shifted to accommodate the dimples she’d had since she was three.

Stick smiled down at her. He knew he could easily get one of the other reptile keepers to cover for him that day—everyone owed him, since he never missed work. But Stick had no car. He was a walker, a taker of great strides. He thought of the cement terrain of Albuquerque, the vast stretches of rolling sidewalks that dipped and rose to accommodate cars, roads, parking lots. Stick imagined himself pushing Cry’s wheelchair up and down all of those tiny hills and valleys—such a journey would shake Cry’s already fragile body to pieces.

“The thing is,” Cry said, “I don’t ride in cars. I still have pieces of one inside my body. Maybe once they get all that scrap out of me, I’ll try riding in one again. But until then I’m a bus rider.” She stopped there and waited for Stick’s reaction.

His face split into a grin of great crooked teeth. “That’s a relief,” he said. “I don’t have a car.”

They met at the aquarium the next Thursday. They visited the turtle lagoon and the stingray pool, the tanks of jellyfish and blowfish and flounder and sharks. Stick saved the moray eel exhibit for last. It was constructed in a huge horseshoe shape, the top of which arched over

the walkway for humans, so that for a few steps one was surrounded on three sides by the yard-long green eels, unblinking, grinning like goblins.

It was as they approached this arch that Cry first spoke of her accident. “Stop here,” she said, and he pushed her chair to the side of the hall so that people could pass. “I want to look at them for a while before we go through.” Dozens of eels hung motionless in the water, as entertained by Cry as she was by them. She leaned back her head to inspect the animals floating in the tank. Stick caught himself staring at the pale white incision over her throat. Her eyes flicked from the eels to his gaze before he could avert it.

“I had surgery on my throat,” she said. “My trachea collapsed.”

One eel floated alone at the bottom of the tank. Though it looked like all the others, for some reason it hung away from them. “I’m sorry,” Stick said. “I wish I knew what to say.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s healing.”

“From a car accident,” Stick said.

“Right. Do you want to hear about it?” Her voice crawled from her body like something subterranean.

Stick nodded. He didn’t want to know about it, imagining the trauma on her body, imagining the blood and the wreckage, the bones broken, the glass and metal in her flesh. But he also wanted to know, the way he waited up at night to watch the boa constrictor stalk the guinea pig he dropped into its cage. The way the snake stalked the furry, round animal, crept up and struck. The twining of the snake’s body around the guinea pig. The breaths that the guinea pig exhaled, with each one the snake’s body constricting just a pocket of air tighter, until that last breath, before the eyes of the animal went dead. Stick named each guinea pig, which he raised in

a stack of pens in the back of the Reptile House. He named them and then he sent them to their deaths.

“I was a gardener,” Cry said. “I had a station wagon full to the brim with rose bushes. A man in a truck ran a red light and hit me. The car rolled almost a block. Over and over. It was like putting a person in a blender full of thorns and glass.”

She told Stick that her throat was crushed. How when they found her she was breathing through a dozen puncture holes in her trachea. How she’d lost her memory of the several months leading up to the collision. How the swelling in her brain had damaged the parts that controlled speech, which was why she spoke with a slur. How for months a nurse came into her room and combed her body for thorns or shards of glass that might have surfaced during the night. How she still, six months later, bled spontaneously as shrapnel breached her skin like creatures creeping forth from a primordial sea. How her legs were irreparably damaged, both femurs broken, how her feet, two shattered vases, were pieced back together meticulously over more than a dozen hours of procedure.

Stick was visualizing the horror the paramedics must have felt when recovering her body from the wreckage when she said, “I’d like to go through now.” Stick pushed her forward and they passed together beneath the bower of twining eels.

When they left the aquarium, the sun hung high and slanted in the sky. Stick pushed Cry to the sidewalk, where he paused to consider the terrain. The cement world spread in every direction in a scape of drop-off curbs, potholed crosswalks, sidewalks cracked and crumbling. A thousand pitfalls to navigate in her chair.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” Cry asked and her rasping voice summoned up a newly learned history of pain and suffering. She was swaddled in a nest of shawl and scarf and hooded sweatshirt between the armrests of her wheelchair. She looked like an insect trapped in a web. He wondered if she were homeless, living in a shelter somewhere, and vowed to wheel her safely wherever she needed to go.

“Nothing,” he said. Maybe later he’d go to the library and see if he could find out about head injuries. Or maybe he’d go wander the circuit of thrift stores, searching for a better wheelchair. “What about you?” he asked.

“Grocery shopping,” she said.

“How will you get there?” Stick asked.

“It’s only a couple blocks and then I can take the bus.”

“How will you carry them?” Stick asked.

“I’ve got these baskets.” She motioned beneath her seat and behind her back.

“How will you get home?” Stick asked.

Cry gave him a hard look. “I don’t need a new father.”

The phrase hit Stick like a punch. He didn’t know where to rest his eyes. The hands that moments before had hungered for the handles of her chair hung damp and useless at his sides.

“I’m sorry,” Cry said.

“I’m sorry too.” Stick took a deep breath and forced himself to smile at her.

She mimed a smile too, and maybe it was enough. He had once again, without meaning to, broken into a whole new plane of Cry’s suffering that went deeper than her scarred face and ruined legs. Her face, had it survived the car accident unscathed, was still only the top layer in a

palimpsest of hardship. She took a deep breath. “It’s nice to see you again, John. But it’s also hard. You’re a man.”

Stick hadn’t expected those words.

“I hate men.”

“I see,” Stick said. He had never heard a woman say such a thing before.

“My boyfriends have been a parade of scum. I won’t go into it. Spartacus was a toady to my father, who was—” Her mouth tightened and her brow crimped. “He was the worst sort of man. To top that all off, the driver of the truck that almost killed me was a man.”

Stick opened his mouth. He wanted to tell her that all men weren’t the same. That there were kind, patient, gentle men in the world. But he thought that arguing on behalf of the male gender would just turn him into another bully with an agenda to push.

“It’ll take time for me to trust you, that’s all.” Some of the anger had drained from her face and now she just looked tired.

“I can give you time,” Stick said. “I’m made of time.” He smiled.

Cry laughed, a dry and pained sound. “Good. Why don’t you give me your phone number? I’ll call you and we can meet up again.”

Stick handed her one of his cards. The zoo had printed them up for all of the zookeepers three years before and Stick hadn’t handed out more than a dozen. He wrote his home number on the back.

She took the card in her frail fingers. “Wow. Fancy.”

“I’m going to go home now,” Stick said. “But I hope to see you soon.”

Cry smiled. “I have a confession to make.”

Stick raised his eyebrows.

“I figured you might still work at the zoo.” She looked at him as if she expected a reaction. “I asked to be brought there, you know, so that I might run into you.”

“Oh!” Stick said.

She blushed and looked down at the arms piled in her lap. “You were always so nice when we were kids. I guess part of healing is trying to find something nice to remember during all the horrible times.”

“Thanks,” Stick said lamely. “I thought you were nice, too.”

She squeezed his hand and then wheeled herself off down the sidewalk. He couldn’t stop grinning, and he hid his foolish mouth with his fingers. They smelled like mint—the residual scent of her hand lotion.

The sun set as Stick walked home from the aquarium. His route took him through alleys and residential streets, past homes full of laughter and conversation and the clink of silverware on plates, dishes being rinsed in sinks. Through a window raised a half-story above the ground Stick slipped a happen-stance glance in at a woman lighting candles on a birthday cake. Her eyes locked with Stick’s and she let out a little yelp. And then Stick was gone, tilting down the alley atop his long strides. When he reached the next street he turned south and the lampposts tripled his shadow, one lamp always ahead, one behind, and one directly above. His three shadows were like parts of his life, the long slim ones behind and ahead of him his past and future, the one cast from above the darkest, the most solid. And he thought, yes, for once this is true: my life is good.

When he turned onto his street he found Rex’s pickup parked outside his house. A bank of clouds reflected the city lights and cast the asphalt in sickly yellow. Rex’s truck was like a

battered old hand, the cab a palm and base of the thumb, the bed long fingers cupping Flowers, out of make-up, reclining in a yellow and pink sun chair. He hoisted a brown-bagged bottle in salute as Stick strode up. Rex sat on a low branch of an ash tree that shaded Stick's sunken garden. His shoes dangled at the end of his skinny legs like something to be picked. He swiped a shot from his own bottle, jewels of liquor glistening in his mustache.

"Sticky!" Flowers called out. "What're you doing here?"

"I live here," Stick replied.

Rex dropped from the branch and met Stick beside the bed of the truck. He held up the bottle. Stick grabbed it around the neck and tilted back a swallow of fire into his gullet. "Buddy," Rex said, "good buddy."

"What're you doing here, I asked him," Flowers said to Rex and laughed. "Like, as if it wasn't his house we were staking out."

"We weren't staking your place out," Rex assured Stick, giving Flowers a dark glance.

"Where you been, though?" Flowers asked. "We've been waiting here all day."

Stick was brimming with the need to talk about Cry. Standing here with Rex, his only confidant, he foresaw a difficult time ahead of stifling that need.

"Shaddup," Rex told Flowers. "I was just looking to pal around with ya, best buddy."

"Three best buddies!" Flowers hollered.

"Truth is," Rex said, ignoring the clown, "we thought you'd want to come out with us tonight and shoot a little pool, throw some darts, maybe get in a little trouble. Spice up your life a little. You know."

Stick's landlady peered through her curtains on the second floor of the house, her brown and wrinkled face haloed in yellow curtains of light. Above, the streetlight cast the the great ash and the tall and somber pines over the three men in shifting screens of shadow. Stick wondered how long the two had been loitering there, drinking, Flowers cackling, Rex cursing, revving the truck's engine, and channeling country music through the stereo. She was probably too afraid of them to call the cops. "We should move," Stick said.

"I agree," said Rex. "Let's head to the Hole. Flowers, you're in the back."

"I'm in the back!" Flowers agreed from his lawn chair.

When Rex was behind the wheel and Stick had folded his body into the passenger seat, Rex turned to him. "Today's your day off, eh?"

"Yes," Stick said.

Rex turned over the engine and revved it with several pumps of his foot. "Where you been?" He asked casually.

"Nowhere," Stick said.

"I been dropping by your house on your days off for ten years. You're always home. Sitting down there reading your books. Working in your garden. Watching your nature specials." He looked at Stick. "And today you're nowhere."

"I was out walking."

"Walking," Rex said. "All day."

"I took a long walk," Stick said.

Rex shrugged. "Okay. So, you were out walking." He smiled tightly at Stick. He pulled the truck away from the curb and drove to the bar without a further word.

That was the moment that mistrust was born between them.

Chapter 6

The Ostrich Rancher

Stick did catch a spider with his Capri Sun trap. He stayed awake nearly the entire night, as silent and motionless as his awkward position would allow. In the dead hours of the morning, amidst the chirping of crickets and the occasional scabble of a mouse in the walls, a brown recluse ventured out from behind the mini-fridge. It crept along the wall a foot above the floor, enticed by the scent leaking from the bait cricket's body. Stick held his breath as it paused over the cavern of the Capri Sun drink pouch, eyeing the world around it for danger. Then, without further preamble it hopped inside.

These were the reliable relationships of the world: predator and prey.

Once the spider was inside, gorging itself on the cricket, Stick pushed the trap shut with his knee, pinning the mouth of the bag to the wall. He held it there for several minutes to allow the spider to become lulled into calm by the closeness and darkness of the bag. Then, he slid the bag up the wall with his knee until he could grasp it with his fingertips. Holding the deodorant, into which he'd carved a chamber, in one hand, he shook the bag with his other to stun the spider. Then he tilted it from the pouch into the cavity and snapped the cap into place. It took several minutes of blundering, his leg extended like the neck of some awkward animal, deodorant between his toes, to position the stick back on the table.

When sleep came, Stick's eyelids were lit by the photographs upon photographs of brown recluse bites he'd seen over the years. The cratered wounds. The rotting flesh. The little hole that led to a baseball-sized reservoir of pus beneath the skin.

The next morning Flowers was still gone. Rex came in a few hours after dawn, his eyes loose like the skin of an old dog. His neck was swollen into barrows of pink with pinprick red centers. A strip of cloth secured a wadded napkin, lopsided and stained with blood, around his wrist.

"Goddamn bat got into the cab last night," Rex grumbled as he began his morning grooming. He stood in front of the rearview mirror mounted on the wall of the shack and combed out the long hair of his mustache and eyebrows, rounding them into three gray handlebars. "How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Long night," was all Stick could say.

"Yeah," Rex went on as he greased and combed back his graying mane. "I woke up at three to a bat sitting on my hand licking blood from a bite on my wrist. Most fucked up experience. Thing had a tongue like a cat."

There were no vampire bats in New Mexico. The furthest north they'd been documented was northern Mexico, and Stick doubted one could stray across so much desert, thin on food sources. "Maybe you dreamed it," Stick said.

Rex held up his wrist and glared at Stick in the mirror. "You call this a dream?"

Outside the generator sputtered. "Better go fill up the generator," Stick said. He was thinking about the bag of Cry's blood that would rot out there if it weren't kept cool.

“No can do,” Rex said. He tilted his head back and peered into each nostril. “We’re out of gas.” He squirted out a slug of toothpaste onto his brush and set about riling it into thick white foam over his teeth. He leaned over Stick to spit in the sink. As Rex backed away, Stick heard the wad of spittle drizzle into the empty crook of pipe by his head. “I even siphoned the gas from the truck’s tank.”

“No gas?” Stick said. “We’ll have to go for help. Get more.” Rex picked up the stick of deodorant. Stick swallowed and tried to keep talking. “The blood will spoil.”

Rex removed the cap and reached under his shirt to rub it in his armpit in a swiveling motion. He looked perfectly calm. He was saying something, words were coming out of his mouth, but Stick couldn’t hear them. He was summoning every ounce of will not to shout out to his old friend.

Rex’s body jerked and he leapt backward into the wall. The deodorant stick clattered to the floor as Rex swatted at his armpit. He leapt backward into the wall again. The wall shook and Stick felt the resonance in the metal pipe. It jingled his chains. The rearview mirror fell to the floor with a tinkle of glass. Rex was growling, ripping off his shirt. He threw it hard on the floor and stomped on it with his jackboots. Then he jumped on the deodorant stick, obliterating it, grinding the green transparent gel into the tile and splitting the plastic casing into slivers. The evidence of Stick’s machinations destroyed.

Rex raised his arm to peer into the forest of brown-gray hair in his armpit. “Goddamn something bit me,” he said. “Some fucking thing.”

“What was it?” Stick asked.

Rex folded his opposite hand into his armpit and closed his arm down around it. He raged back and forth across the kitchen, kicking shards of deodorant stick, leaping upon the shirt two-footed, propelling the little table into the door with a shove of his free palm. “This fucking desert,” he ranted. “It’s like we’re not even in civilization anymore. Bats, mosquitoes, man-eating bugs.” He stopped and lifted his arm to examine his armpit.

“Painful?” Stick asked.

“Fucking hell,” Rex said. He punched the wall and dust rained down from the cracks in the roof boards.

“Does it ache or sting?” Stick asked, even though he already knew that it would sting sharply for only a few minutes before it went numb. In a few hours it would start to itch as necrosis took hold. The cells around the bite would rot and that rot would spread, eating a deep hole into the flesh. The body would secrete pus to stave off the onslaught of infection and in a few days, a week, Rex would have a cavity eaten in his body, his arteries chewed, bones licked yellow and dripping like the formations of a wet cave. He would almost certainly not die, but the wound would look awful. It would swell up in a volcano-like shape of gangrenous tissue, and it would smell like Rex was rotting from the inside out.

“Fucking stings. Like a wasp,” Rex said. In his agitation, he’d loosened the bandage around his wrist, and he began to re-tie it.

“Probably a spider bite,” Stick said.

“What kind of spider lives out here?” Rex asked as he dug through his armpit hair again, searching for the bite.

“See if you can find the body,” Stick said.

Rex drew his bowie knife and poked at the debris of the deodorant, picked up the shirt with the tip of the blade and shook it at arm's length. "What kind of spiders you find out here?" Rex asked as he shook.

"Wolf spiders," Stick said. "Daddy long-legs. Few dozen types of *salticidae*."

"Salt-what?"

"Jumping spiders."

"Poisonous?" Rex asked. He dropped his shirt on the table and spread it out with quick lunges and retreats of his blade.

Stick shrugged in his chains. "Depends what kind. Probably nothing to worry about."

Rex lifted a little crushed brown mass from his shirt with the tip of his knife and slowly brought it over for Stick to examine. Stick leaned in to take a look.

"What is it?" Rex asked. "Do you know it?"

Stick frowned at the corpse. "Brown recluse, by the look of it."

"No fucking way."

"You can tell by the violin shape on the back. That's how you identify them."

Outside there was a distant stomping on the dirt drive of what sounded like a herd of feet. Rex looked over Stick and out the window. "Holy shit," he said. "Flowers is back."

Rex rushed out of the shack. Stick forced his aching joints and knotted muscles into motion and rose to his knees, twisting in his chains until he could look over the sink and out the window. The yard was teeming with ostriches. They were huge, the largest Stick had seen, most of them taller than he was. Their necks were like leathern tentacles, their bodies plump with feathers. They were straight-mouthed with black eyes two inches across. The birds loped around

the yard, pecking at the hard soil, rooting through the weeds, staring out from beneath the shade of the one big cottonwood.

Flowers and Rex barged into the shack. Flowers dripped sweat in great smears of clown paint that stained the collar of his clown suit. The groin of his trousers was coated in white and brown feathers and he had his big fat pistol planted to the back of the head of a curly-headed woman that fell to all fours on the kitchen floor. Her coils of her sandy blond hair were matted to her head and neck with sweat. Her eyes, pinched at the corners with the crow's feet of a cowboy, were the color of granite. A paste of blood and dirt and sweat smudged from her hands over the tile.

"What is this?" Stick demanded. It was too hard to remain standing and face away from the sink, so he fell back to the floor, curling his arms behind his head.

"Shut up," Flowers said, aiming his gun at Stick for a few seconds before putting it back in the woman's hair.

"No, please answer," Rex said. "What the fuck is this?" He was still shirtless and he gestured at the woman with his drawn knife.

"She's a farmer," Flowers said and grinned.

"I'm a rancher," the woman said, still panting for breath after God only knew what kind of terrible exertions Flowers had put her through. She spoke with a cowboy twang, as taut as wire.

"What the hell did you bring her here for?" Rex asked.

"What?" Flowers asked, still grinning like a proud child.

“What is she doing here?” Rex enunciated each word, as if Flowers was hard of hearing.

“We sent you to get a vehicle, not a woman.”

Flowers cocked his head. “How come you’re not wearing a shirt?”

“I was bitten by some damn spider.” Rex stepped forward and held his spider-tipped knife in Flowers’s face. “See?” He shoved it a little closer and Flowers’s eyes spread in wide baby-blue pools. “Now,” he continued slowly, “tell me what the hell happened.”

“I brought her to show us how to use the birds,” Flowers peeped.

“Use them for what?” Rex asked, still not lowering his knife.

“Riding,” Flowers said. “I was walking toward the mountains because you told me there might be water that way and I came to this valley and there was a river, and an old dirt road, and this lady,” he bumped her shoulder with his knee, “came up riding a damned ostrich!” He burst out laughing in his high-pitched tumbling way. “So, I threw down on her. She was like ten feet away and I made her get off the bird and then I asked her if she had a truck.”

“And why didn’t you bring the truck instead of these birds, you idiot?” Rex yelled. He threw his knife on the table and clasped his hands through his hair.

“Hey! Don’t call me an idiot!” Flower yelled back. He stepped forward, absently resting the barrel of the pistol on the back of the woman’s neck.

“I wouldn’t if you had brought a truck instead of a hostage and a herd of prehistoric birds!”

“She sabotaged the truck!” Flowers yelled. “Okay! I was feeding one of the ostriches, because she said I could, and she distracted me and cut the engine cables or something. I don’t know. I looked in there and it was just a bunch of mutilated cords. She duped me. Okay?”

“Oooh,” Rex moaned. “You had a truck and you lost it so you could feed some birds. I should have sent Stick. At least he would have brought back something useful.”

“Hey,” Flowers said, “don’t be disappointed in me. That’s why I brought the birds. She farms ostriches,” Flowers said, tapping the woman on the back of her skull with the barrel of his gun. It made a heavy thud. “Big ones. You can ride them. I rode one back here. Took like four hours. Would have gone faster but I made her jog the last few miles, instead of ride. You know, to show her we’re serious.”

That explained why she was out of breath, sweating, her hands bloody from falling in dirt laced with rock and desert thorns. The woman looked at Stick from the corner of her gray eyes. She was probably forty-five, athletic, her skin dried and pinched from working in the sun. She wore roper-style cowboy boots, caked with dust, a button-up paisley blue blouse, and jeans with a big silver buckle.

“Get your gun off her head,” Stick rumbled at Flowers from his place on the floor.

“What?” Flowers turned to him, a faint smile on his lips.

“Your gun. You’re hurting her,” Stick said.

“Oh yeah,” Flowers said. “Sorry.” He shuffled back a few steps and bent his arm up to rest the pistol on his shoulder, like a soldier shouldering his rifle. The woman’s frame relaxed a little and she took a big, deep breath.

The two men went back outside, pulling the woman to her feet by the collar and pushing her in front of them. Stick twisted and rose again. The small herd of ostriches was high-stepping around the yard beside the white ice cream truck, in the spreading shade of the green boughs of the cottonwood. Their head skimmed close to the earth for seeds, insects, rocks to swallow and

mulch the food in their gizzards. Their feathers were like puffs of clouds captured and lashed to leathery bodies. Several of them wore saddles; another two were hitched to a cart. Rex wandered among them in a state of wonder, dwarfed by their height. They disregarded him entirely as he passed among them, touching their feathers, stroking a leathern-knotted knee. The woman sat in the shade of the ice-cream truck, from where the generator fitted and coughed. She sat cross-legged, palms on knees, her narrow eyes tracing Flowers's movements across the yard where he stood next to the largest bird, black-feathered and weighing probably six hundred pounds.

Flowers's mouth framed words, but Stick couldn't quite make them out through the walls of the shack and the hum of the generator. Flowers chattered at Rex and touched the huge bird on the back, the rump, the long, snaking neck. When he stooped to touch the animal's two-toed foot the bird lunged at him, its neck striking, snake-like, pecking at his shoulders, the pudgy love-handles that shook as he fled. The ostrich chased him a few yards through the dirt and weeds, then trailed off to resume combing the ground for food, oblivious to Flowers's brandished pistol.

Rex shot an amused look at the woman. Her face was like weathered stone. He walked over to her, said something, and smiled. She just stared back at him. Flowers's mouth mimed cuss words at the bird, which had wandered close to Stick's window, its catlike face peering in at him. Rex flicked his knife at the woman, like a finger beckoning. She got up and dusted her thighs and ambled after Rex, who led her to the big cottonwood tree. He motioned her to back up against its trunk, tied her to it with a length of rope. He moved in front of her, his glistening back to Stick, his hands on his hips. The blade in his fist projected at an oblique angle, and the sun turned the steel into a rectangle of white light. Rex was saying something to her, his face turned

away, but his head vibrated slightly as his jaw moved. Probably playing some mind game the military used to manipulate prisoners of war.

Rex turned away from the tied-up woman and grabbed Flowers by the elbow, steering him back toward the shack. They entered and Rex righted the table and perched a hip on it. Flowers kicked Stick in the sole of his shoe.

“Looks like I solved our problems, eh Sticky-boy?” Flowers said. He kicked Stick in the shoe again and stuck his gun in his pocket. “Eh?”

Rex held an arm behind his head and returned to examining his armpit. His fingers treaded through the hair as if through tall grass. A red lump rose in the midst of the hair and the green paste of deodorant and sweat.

“Goddamn,” Rex muttered, peering at it.

“Bitcha right there, huh?” Flowers said, also peering. He grabbed his shirtfront in his hand and pumped it up and down to fan his torso. “Hurt much?”

“Stings,” Rex said, poking at the bump. “And itches.”

“What kind of spider?” Flowers asked.

“Goddamn recluse.”

“No,” Flowers said. He cocked his head at the bite. “Really?”

“According to Stick,” Rex said, “who would know.”

“Must be, then,” Flowers said. “Stick knows his bugs.”

Rex turned his eyes on Stick. “What do you know about these spider bites?” he asked as he stood there, arm behind his head, the clown peering at the bump. “Should one of us be sucking the poison out?”

“Not me!” chirped the clown.

“I saved your life that time in Kuwait and you won’t suck a little poison out of my armpit?”

“Let her suck it out!” Flowers protested, pointing back through the shack’s door.

“Sucking out the poison won’t help,” Stick said. “It’s the necrosis that’s the problem.”

“Necrosis?” Flowers said, and his wide mouth stretched into a grimace. “Sounds bad.”

“The soft-tissue cells start to break down. It’s like a big hole rotting in your body.”

“Like how big?” Rex asked.

Stick made a baseball-sized ring with his thumb and forefinger. “Sometimes smaller, sometimes bigger.”

“That’s the whole fucking pit!” Flowers said to Stick. He turned to Rex. “That’s your whole armpit, Rex!”

Rex squinted at Stick, as if trying to pry any deceit from him with his gaze. Stick felt sweat trickle between his shoulder blades, and forced himself to look calmly back.

“Hey, if your armpit rots out at least you’ll smell better,” Flowers said and guffawed.

Rex turned and punched Flowers in the belly.

“Ow!” said the clown.

“So what do I do?” Rex asked Stick. His voice was low and he had that bullying look on his face.

“Hospital,” Stick said. “You need treatment to stop the spread of the rot. It’s like gangrene: treatable.”

“Hospital’s the only way?” Rex asked.

Stick nodded and the trickle of sweat ran down his spine into the waist of his jeans. “It can be cleaned and cared for to slow the rot. But you need a doctor. Soon.”

“Alright,” Rex said. “That leaves us no choice.” Stick felt hope bloom at these words, like a hunger in his stomach. “We’ve got to cut loose everything but the choicest merchandise and ride to Mexico. We’ve got the ostrich cart and lots of ice in the truck. We’ll load it up and go.”

“On ostrich?” Flowers asked.

Rex nodded.

Flowers puffed up his chest. “I found the ostriches,” he said to Stick. “Me.”

Rex was still plotting out his plan. “We’ll rip out the insulation from the truck and pack the cart with as much ice and plasma as will fit. Maybe a little O-negative if there’s room. We should get to Mexico in a couple days.”

“What about this one?” Flowers asked, leering at Stick. “Should we leave him here to starve? Or should we lock him in the truck with a few dozen vampire bats and let him fight them?”

“Whaddaya say, traitor?” Rex asked Stick. “Which would you prefer?”

“Neither,” Stick said. “You need me to help you with your spider bite.”

Rex tilted his head at him. “I guess we are lucky to have you along.”

“Untie me then,” Stick said.

“I’m considering it,” Rex said.

“Consider it now,” Stick said.

“What?” Flowers shrieked. “Why would you consider that after he ruined our whole plan?”

“Have you gotten over your little conscience problem?” Rex asked.

Stick nodded.

“Once you’re loose,” Rex mused, “there’s no turning back. You’re a very difficult man to restrain.”

“I don’t know anything about fighting,” Stick said. “Plus, you have guns.”

“You do know about spider bites,” Rex said.

“And we’re best friends,” Stick added.

“We *were* best friends,” Rex admitted.

“What’re you both crazy?” Flowers yelled, waving his hands in the air. “How can you still be best friends? How come nobody wants to be best friends with me? Good old Flowers, who found the ostriches and all!”

“So, you’ll behave if I untie you?” Rex asked, ignoring Flowers’s tirade.

“I just want the one bag. I’ll help you get to Mexico. I’ll see if I can treat your spider bite. Then we part ways, no hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings,” Rex said. He tapped his finger on his upper lip. “Okay. I’ll let you loose. You can have the one bag after we get to Mexico.”

“Ooh,” Flowers moaned, covering his face with a palm. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Don’t I get any say in this?”

“No,” Rex and Stick said simultaneously.

Flowers looked back and forth at the two of them, his mouth hanging open like a broken trap door. “You two don’t understand! It’s not about the profit. It’s about the brotherhood. Once you enter into a caper, it’s a pact—like in wartime—and there’s no backing out.” Stick tried to cut Flowers off, but the clown kept going. “By running off with even one bag of blood you betray the brotherhood and now you’re worse than the enemy.”

“What enemy?” Stick asked.

“In wartime,” Flowers shouted over him, “we execute traitors! If you capture an enemy there’re rules about how to treat him—or her,” he pointed back through the door, “but if you betray the brotherhood, you get put up against a wall and shot! That’s the way it should be!”

“He’s coming with us,” Rex said. “He can help me with my bite. And then we’ll let him have the one bag.”

“You want help with your bite?” Flowers asked. “Watch this,” and he drew his gun and jammed the big fat silver muzzle in Stick’s ear. Stick tilted his head, but Flowers kept pressing, until Stick’s head was as close to his shoulder as it could go. “Tell me how to treat the spider bite!” Flowers screamed at Stick’s head. “Tell me!” He backed up and shoved the gun back in the pocket of his clown suit. “See? That’s all you have to do.”

“We’re bringing him,” Rex said. “I’m unchaining him.” Rex moved from the table and stood in front of Stick. Rex’s eyes lost focus as he looked out the window over the sink. “Damn it,” he said.

“What?” Flowers asked.

“Our hostage is gone.”

Chapter 7

Positive Energy

Stick had discovered Cry's blood in their stash during the journey toward Mexico just after the heist, sitting in the back of the truck as it rattled south. His breath huffed from him in slow clouds in the refrigerated cold. He was surrounded by laundry baskets piled with red blood in thick plastic bags. Each was a pint in measure, with an adhesive name label and red biohazard symbol. The freezers lining the walls were packed with ice and blood plasma, yellow and viscous. Another basket was half-filled with Capri Sun drink pouches, the other half with blood. Stick was perched on a stool mounted to the floor, his feet braced against the freezer units opposite him, a blue plastic basket with a couple of broken staves on the floor between his knees. It had once housed Flowers's dirty socks, and now it contained several cubic feet of the human organism's essence.

The truck heaved and roared. There were no windows in the back and Stick sat in the light that edged in through the seams of insulation. Stick might well have been in the stomach of a monster. He could have been on an interstate or an urban street, rutting through a desert dirt road or speeding through the suburbs. All else was indeterminate, save for the reality of what he had done.

He picked up the plump bags, one by one. Rex and Flowers spoke in the front seat, Rex's low growling and Flowers gleeful bark muted by the insulation secured over the sliding window that separated the cab from the back. Stick picked up bags and peered at names. Monique Jackson. Tori Ortega. Latoya Smith. Samuel Littlefoot. Names of a hybrid populace, fused by

war and conquest, people who had finally come to live peacefully together in this desert, which for thousands of years had been squabbled over and fought for. Stick was a product of this place, a half-son of three peoples. Each bag weighed in his palm dense and red like a kidney or a liver. He'd held such organs before, from animals, and the way they gleamed in the slanting light and jiggled slightly but otherwise sat perfectly still belied the complexity of their function. You inserted them into a body and they sprung to action. It was the same with blood. A bag of blood held millions of cells that would carry essential elements to every other cell in the body.

The blood of Gertrude Kite. The blood of Rudolfo Garcia.

Stick wore his long coat with the collar turned up, a hat, and gloves. The truck was no colder than a New Mexican evening in the mountains, but the chill set in faster when one couldn't move about. And so Stick cycled through the blood, reading the names, for the movement, for the ceremony.

He read her name and put the bag back in the basket, just like any other. He picked up the next one and couldn't decipher the letters. He blinked, but the next name wouldn't coalesce. He held onto the new bag and looked down at the one with her name.

Cryopathria Rex.

The truck rolled on, surging over swells in the asphalt, chugging up hills and free-falling the downslopes. Flowers honked the horn and hooted and a fist pounded the dashboard from the passenger side, Rex beating his joy into the physical world. Stick sat there surrounded by jiggling red bags, holding one and staring at another. There was no name in the world like it. It too was a name amalgamated from two cultures, her first name Transylvanian, her last a transformation of the Greek name of her father's family, which had arrived by boat a century ago

only to have some Ellis Island agent reduce something polysyllabic and unpronounceable into an Americanism.

He knew it was hers from the name. And from a conversation they'd had several months ago, before the fragile trust between them had crumbled.

It was a few weeks after their trip to the aquarium. Their fingers sat entwined across the armrests of a park bench and her wheelchair, one parked beside the other. The plain of green grass was quiet and fragrant around them. In the distance a woman stood in the sand of the playground, hands on hips large with pregnancy. Her toddlers were specks chasing each other between the uprights of the jungle gym, wrestling with the dangling swings. A jury of crows stood along the power line. A front of thin clouds dimmed the afternoon sun.

Cry's nimbus skin was slashed with pink and pitted with red. The emerald eye drooped and twitched beneath the maul of her accident. She caught Stick looking at her and he dropped his stare to her fingers, tiny in his.

"Next week," she said, "you should take me somewhere exciting."

Over the past few weeks he had taken her to the Copper Lounge, a low-ceilinged bar with booths sunken into the walls like alcoves. To a café with a windowless and nearly deserted back room. To a movie. All dark, quiet places.

Cry squeezed Stick's fingers and smiled. "It's like you're trying to keep me hidden," she said.

"I was probably thinking more about hiding myself," Stick said and huffed out a miserable laugh. "People stare enough as it is."

“Then you know what it’s like to be a woman,” she said. “To be stared at.”

Stick thought about the stares, the way people looked quickly away when he returned their looks. “At least people look at women because they’re beautiful.”

“It’s dangerous. A stare,” she said. “My father used to stare at me. It was like he was smothering me with his gaze. Men chase women with their eyes. It’s like being groped, only there’s nothing you can do to stop it. I think I like being looked at more for being a cripple than I used to for being beautiful.”

“You’re still beautiful,” Stick told her. He clasped his other hand over their fingers and desperately sought the words to heal her. “I think you’re the most beautiful woman in Albuquerque.”

“Don’t say that.” Her hand was limp and damp in his. “People shouldn’t be ranked like horses. I’m glad to be ugly.”

They sank into the quiet stirrings of the park, each misunderstood and awkward. Stick had ruined their conversation, the only thing he was reliable for, and he longed to imprison himself in his apartment with his pet spider, where he was safe from his clumsy way with words.

Cry pried her fingers from his hand and he thought, this is the moment when she leaves me. But then those clammy fingers were on his cheek and her head was tilted back to look up into his face, just as his mother used to touch him with her fragile fingers. “Johnny,” Cry said. “Take me someplace fun. I want to see you smile.”

“I can do that,” he said as that hopeless feeling surged up inside of him. He had no idea what regular people did for fun, but images played through his head of cocktail parties, discotheques with dance floors aswarm with attractive people, water parks, people laughing in

bright places. "I'll think about it over the week and plan something fun." The word sounded wrong coming out in his subterranean rumble.

"No," she said, grinning. "Now."

"Now?"

She wrinkled her nose at him and poked him in the ribs. "Now."

He found himself smiling back, despite everything. "Well," he said, recalling the parked cars swamping his street, as they did every fall. "There's the fair."

The New Mexico State Fair. Stick hadn't been to it since middle school, twenty-plus years ago, when he and Spartacus Rex would wander the dirt maze of livestock, dizzying rides, scam artists, flea markets, and freak shows that occupied a square mile of the city every fall. The two always saved up their meager dollars for weeks beforehand so that they could go on the Round-up, the Spider, the Cages, the Scrambler, all of which spun riders around until somebody barfed. In those days, the fairgrounds were rough and dirty and labyrinthine, and it was always a gamble whether Rex would end up scrapping with another teenager from one of the gangs of boys roving the Midway, looking for someone smaller to pick on. They'd been thrown out for fighting, stealing, sneaking onto rides, tormenting barnyard stock, pissing in feed troughs, booing the country music acts, throwing rocks, exiting their car during the darkest places in the spook house and leaping out at the next car—all social misdemeanors executed by Rex, with Stick tagging reluctantly along. When Flowers joined the two of them, all bets were off.

Cry and Stick paid the entrance fee and the attendant opened the handicapped gate to the side of the turnstiles. It was mid-evening on a Saturday and the grounds were packed. The world was a sea of heads, and here and there a small child riding on a father's shoulders gave Stick a

gleeful look. Cry, even though she was drowning in waists, hunched smilingly in her chair. Stick worried that Rex would be there, lurking near an air rifle shooting gallery or emerging from the racetrack. It was an irrational fear, but it had Stick double-taking at every man with a mustache.

The fair had transformed since Stick was a boy. Beyond the gates the dirt road that Stick remembered had been transformed into a paved avenue lined with white cedars and booths of painters, glass-blowers, woodworkers—artisans of every variety hawking their finery. The distant Midway was lit up in a circus of twirling neon. There were Anglo families with children dressed in knit sweaters and looking like they'd traveled from far away and Chicano clans from great-grandmother to newborn. Clusters of girls with florescent lip gloss minced their flamingo legs and giggled. Boys hugged the dark spaces stared at the girls. The air was filled with the roar of distant crowds and the stench of horses.

“Where do you want to go?” Stick asked.

Cry waved a hand. “Everywhere,” she said. “Let’s just go all over.”

And they did. Stick pushed her past corrals of cows fed so large they resembled hippopotami, past pigs, sheep, and bearded goats that stuck their heads through the wire of their pens to nibble. Cry cooed over a warehouse of rabbit hutches. Lop-ears, angoras, palominos, German giant grays as big as toddlers, palm-sized dwarfs. As Cry laced her fingers through the hexagons of wire for the bunnies to sniff, all Stick could think about was which reptile to feed them to. They saw chinchillas, a thousand varieties of rodent, a room strident with songbirds. Back outside, they wound through stalls of alpaca, llamas, miniature donkeys, designer pigs, emus, beefaloes, and even a corral of ostriches awarded a blue ribbon simply for showing up.

Stick wheeled Cry into the flashing lights and wooing voices of the Midway, a neighborhood of rides that spun patrons in a circle for two minutes in three dozen varieties. Between the rides were lines of rigged ball, ring, and even rubber frog tossing games. Young men hung from a rocking climbing wall and another hefted a hammer at the test-your-strength tower. They wandered through a freak-show alley with cartoon posters of six-legged horses, a man with eyes that popped out of his head, werewolf, lobster, and mermaid women. A barker paused in his exhortations to stare hungrily at Stick across the crowd. "You sir!" he yelled from his soapbox. "You sir!"

The Midway was dirt and spilled ice cream and clots of scowling teenagers, just as Stick remembered it. Ride attendants with garden hoses casually sprayed off vomit and guided children into the wet seats. Stick and Cry went on no rides, they played no games. She seemed content to tour the aisles between rides and stalls, as if she were in a museum or zoo. He bought her cotton candy, which she held aloft like a torch, tearing shreds from it with her fingers and dangling them into her mouth.

As he wheeled her back through the gates and south toward Central Avenue, she raised her arms over her shoulders and rested her hands on his. Stick computed the closest bus stop and hoped she hadn't missed the last ride. When they hit Central Cry craned her neck up and around and looked at him.

"You live nearby, don't you?"

"I do," he said.

"Show me where you live," she said.

"You might miss the last bus," Stick said.

“If I miss it, I miss it,” she said. “You can’t go through life worrying about buses.”

“Alright,” he said and punched the button to cross. He pushed her down the curb and through the cones of headlights, and when they were on Louisiana headed south traffic became calmer. Cry’s hands relaxed atop his. He took a shortcut across the parking lot of El Mezquite, a Mexican discount superstore. Across the street was Talin Market, where rich people went to purchase food imported from every corner of the world, and behind it was a buddhist temple with its curved roof of red tile. The rumble from the asphalt vibrated the wheelchair’s handles. They turned west on Zuni, a street named for a tribe, that split into Lead and Cole to the west.

They turned on Stick’s quiet side street. His landlord’s windows were dark. The screen of foliage and trees around Stick’s sunken garden muted his porch light. He wheeled Cry to the aperture in the trees where the cement steps led down half a story into the ground. Wild things stirred in the bushes. Spiderwebs gleamed silver in the half-light.

“This is spooky,” Cry said.

“Yes,” Stick admitted, thinking of the big, hairy spider she’d find inside.

“It suits you,” she said.

“Hold on,” Stick said. He tilted her chair onto its back wheels and eased it down gently, step-by-step. He could have just as easily swept the entire thing, woman and all, up into his arms and carried it down, but thought it would be disrespectful. The patio was bare cement, trees rising tall all around, the planters on three sides thick with plants and small, hidden creatures, the fourth side bulging with bay windows. The eaves hung with webs and cocoons like holiday tinsel.

The interior of Stick's apartment was dark. It smelled of damp and dish soap. Stick flicked the light switch and the first thing Cry saw was Ralph, Stick's pet tarantula, who was crouched in his terrarium like a cat waiting to be let outside.

"Oh by God!" Cry yelped.

"This is Ralph," Stick said. "He's very friendly."

"I'm sure he is," Cry said, leaning as far away from him as her chair would allow.

"He's used to being let out of his cage when I get home," Stick said. "But I'll leave him in, if you'd like."

"Ah, that would be great," Cry said. "I'm trying to learn to see all of your creatures as the beautiful animals they are. But it might, um, take me a while before I'm ready to be friendly."

"I understand," Stick said. "We're taught our whole lives to fear spiders."

Her hands were twitching in her lap. "I guess it's just another prejudice."

"Maybe," Stick said.

Ralph lifted his forelegs and pressed them against the glass. His compound eyes gleamed as he absorbed the world in a hundred overlapping facets.

"Are you going to show me around?" Cry asked.

"Of course," Stick said. "It's basically just two rooms. There's the front," he gestured across the sprawling front chamber, divided into a living room with his television and his brown couch that stretched the length of the wall and bent into an L-shape at the door to his bedroom. On the other side of the bedroom door his kitchen counter curved into another L, forming a bar, completed by two stools. Everything was carpeted in brown and the walls were red brick. He

pushed her into the bedroom, which consisted of a closet, his extra-long bed, and the bathroom door. “And the back.”

“Nice and simple,” Cry said. “Cozy.”

Stick nodded. He pulled her backwards into the front room. “Would you like a beer? Or tea?”

“Beer,” Cry said. “And could you help me onto the couch?”

Stick didn’t know whether to just slip an arm under her legs and another around her back and lift her, or to wait for instructions. She answered his question by raising her arms to him like a child asking to be held. He stooped and took her body in his hands, her fingers clasped behind his neck. She leaned her head toward his shoulder and her breath tickled his neck. He swiveled and set her amidst the cushions, slowly, not wanting to let her go. Stick retrieved two beers, wrenched the caps loose with the opener mounted to his bar and joined her on the couch. She hauled her legs up beside her with her hands. When she was done, one of her knees touched his thigh.

“Can you feel anything in them?” Stick asked.

She nodded. “They’re just weak.”

Stick took a drink from his beer and stared into the dark barrel of the bottle.

“Don’t worry,” Cry said. “I’m healing.”

“Will you ever—?” He couldn’t finish the question. The prospect of losing his own legs was so daunting that just saying the words was too much.

“One day,” she said. “With a walker or crutches first. And then—” She shrugged. “I’m very hopeful.”

Stick took another swig from his bottle. Humanity was fooling itself if it thought civilization was more just than the natural world. Here was a woman who had suffered at the hand of a tyrant who had beaten, bullied, and belittled her through childhood. She'd escaped at fifteen into homelessness, finally built a decent life for herself, only to have it smitten away by another asshole behind the wheel of a car. At least animals hunted and killed out of necessity.

“Hey,” Cry said. “Don’t sit there being sad. I’m getting better.”

“Your dad,” Stick said. “I want to find him and throw him in the Rio Grande.”

Cry shook her head.

“And the guy who hit you with his car. I hope he’s suffering.”

Cry bumped his knee with her beer bottle. “Men have been treating me like shit my whole life. That’s just how it is,” she said. “For years I wanted to kill my father. I planned it over and over in my head, especially during the tough times. I went through a few bad years—stealing, some drugs, other bad choices.” Her voice faltered. “I had dreams where I slit his throat like a pig. Men are bastards and you just have to accept it and avoid them.” She flashed him a little smile. “And hold on to the nice ones.”

Stick managed to smile back at her.

“Sometimes,” Cry said, “you just have to pretend to be happy. There’s so much about the world to hate that you could be miserable all the time. So you just pretend. And if you smile enough and force yourself to laugh enough, you all the sudden find that you feel happy, even just a little. Sometimes, you have to beat your misery down with a hammer.”

It sounded like something that Rex would say. And suddenly he dreaded the prospect of Rex showing up unannounced at his home. He could only hope that it was too late at night.

“Soon,” she said, “I’m going to show you where I live. I’ve gotten permission from my roommates.”

“Permission?” Stick said.

“I live with a lot of other women. Men aren’t allowed in the house unless everyone agrees.”

Stick felt awkward enough around one woman. Thinking about entering a place full of them was enough to make him get up and fetch another pair of beers. He opened both and sank back into the couch next to Cry. “Is that your solution to life?” Stick asked. “Separate completely from men and let us destroy each other?”

Cry laughed. “No. But if I make a safe space for myself, maybe I can give positive energy back to the world.”

“Positive energy,” Stick repeated.

“Society runs on good and bad energy. The more positive energy you give to other people, the better they feel. Then they pass it on.”

Stick shook his head. “How does that work, practically?”

“Well, here’s one thing,” Cry said. “I almost bled to death after the car accident. Blood transfusions saved my life. People giving blood, that’s positive energy.”

“Makes sense,” Stick said.

“I’m going to give blood as soon as I’m healthy enough,” Cry said. “My doctor said I may be ready in a couple months. That will be a holy day.”

Chapter 9

The Blackjack Chicken

Stick picked up the bag of blood with her name printed on the white label. His lungs huffed clouds of fog that bulged and withered. All around him a sea of blood bags jiggled with the motion of the truck.

Stick pounded on the insulation covering the window between him and the two other men. “We have to turn around,” he shouted.

“You say something back there?” Flowers’s voice was muffled above the motors, the din of the radio, the highway rolling away beneath the tires.

“Turn around!” Stick yelled.

“Did he say turn around?” Flowers asked.

“Just hang on,” Rex yelled back. “There’s a rest stop in 23 miles.”

Stick seized the insulation and ripped it from the window. It came off in strips of brown paper and hunks of pink fiberglass mesh. When he dug through to the handle of the window, he wrenched at it until the sealant squeaked and split and it opened with such force that the safety glass spider-webbed.

“Jesus!” Flowers said and nearly steered the truck off the road.

“What the hell are you doing?” Rex shouted.

“We need to turn around,” Stick said.

“Is something wrong with the blood?” Flowers asked.

“You drive,” Rex said to Flowers. “Leave the questions to me.” He turned to Stick. “Is something wrong with the blood?”

“We took hers,” Stick said.

“Whose?” Rex asked.

Flowers was half-turned in his seat. The truck veered and swerved as he tried to focus one eye on Stick and one on the road.

“Someone I care about,” Stick said.

“Watch the goddamn road,” Rex said.

“Under control!” Flowers assured him as the truck fish-tailed back and forth across the rumble strip.

“Christ!” Rex yelled at him.

Stick nearly slipped from his stool and plunged into a basket of O-negative. He regained his balance and stuck his head back into the aperture. “Turn around,” he said again.

“Not happening,” Rex said.

“Then just pull over,” Stick said. “I’m going back.”

“Keep driving,” Rex told Flowers. “Don’t slow down.”

“I’ll hitch back. Pull over.”

Rex fixed Stick with a mustache-quivering glare. “No way. We started this thing together. We’re finishing together. In Mexico.”

“I’m done. I’m getting out and going back to Albuquerque.”

“What am I doing?” Flowers asked, steering the van in little jerks, his knuckles white at two and ten. “Am I stopping? Are we going back to ‘Burque?”

“Yes,” Stick said.

“No,” Rex said. “Drive.”

“Pull over,” Stick said.

The van slowed.

“Step on it, shithead,” Rex said.

The van roared faster.

Stick reached through the window and clasped Flowers’s throat. “Stop,” he commanded.

“Right now.” The clown’s throat gulped against the pads of Stick’s fingers.

“Let him go, Stick,” Rex said, fishing a hand around beneath the front seat. “We can talk about this.”

Stick tightened his grip and the clown’s throat let out a little squeak.

Rex drew Flowers’s big fat silver pistol from below the seat and positioned the barrel, almost gently, between Stick’s eyes. The steel was warm against his skin. “Keep driving,” Rex told Flowers.

Flowers’s Adam’s apple writhed. The van slowed and eased onto the shoulder.

“He won’t kill you, Flowers.” Rex stared down the sights of the barrel into Stick’s eyes. “When someone’s choking you, you pass out before you die, and if you pass out I’ll blow this traitor’s brains out.”

Flowers choked out unintelligible sounds.

“We’ll have to clean his brains off all the merchandise,” Rex said.

“You won’t do it,” Stick knew.

“And you won’t kill the clown,” Rex said.

A car honked from behind them, swerved around and sped off. Flowers activated the blinker and the right-hand tires bit into dirt. Stick squeezed harder and the clown's tongue protruded from his mouth. He let go of the wheel and pried at Stick's fingers.

Rex eased back the hammer of the pistol. It clicked in place and Rex's pointer finger twitched on the trigger. Stick released the clown's throat. Flowers slumped over the wheel in a fit of gasping and rasped curses. The van jerked to a halt, straddling the line between the asphalt and the desert.

"Put your goddamn traitor hands through the window," Rex said to Stick.

Stick stuck his hands through, palm to palm. Rex, still pressing the gun barrel to Stick's forehead, drew a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket. He slapped a circlet around one of Stick's wrists, let the other dangle as he tightened until it wedged against the wrist-bone. He slapped the second circlet on the other wrist, tightened it.

When he was cuffed, Stick said, "That blood." He clasped his fingers together. "It's your sister's."

Rex pointed the gun at the floor of the truck and carefully lowered the hammer with both thumbs. Flowers lay panting against the steering column.

"Say what?" Rex said.

"We took a bag of Cry's blood."

Rex's face hardened. "That's the woman you've been seeing," he said. "That's the woman you've been hiding from me. My sister."

"You have to let me take it back," Stick pleaded.

“You sonnofabitch. I should shoot you right now.” But he stowed the gun back beneath the seat. “Keeping my only sister a secret from me.”

“She asked me—”

“I don’t care what she asked,” Rex said. “Best fucking friends. My own fucking sister.”

Stick struggled for a way to reply. A way to express the complexity of his feelings into words. But nothing came.

And as Flowers regained his breath and Rex glared bloody murder and Stick stuttered, hands clasped as if in prayer, a siren blared behind them.

Rex wasn’t angry. He was hurt. Stick knew this. He’d been Rex’s friend since they were children and both had lived parallel lives of loneliness and dejection. Rex had been there when Stick’s mother died. And Stick had been with him during the weeks after Cry had disappeared. She was fifteen; they were seventeen. Rex had picked on her, he’d spied on her, he’d put all nature of excrement and creepy-crawlies in her sock drawer, her shoes, over the shower curtain after picking the lock of the bathroom. He’d pinched her and kicked her and once or twice given her a black eye. He’d stolen her underwear and hung it in trees. These were the things that Rex did to show he cared. It was how he’d been trained.

After Cry vanished, there was no word for weeks. Rex sank into a listless torpor. Stick would find him sitting on a rock by the muddy river, plunking stones, had to fetch him for school every day. He’d show up in the morning and have to roll Rex out of bed, capture the roil of his hair beneath a ball cap, and lead him to school. Then out of nowhere Rex would spring from this

dulled state like a spider from a subterranean den, assaulting a star football player, throwing a chair at a chemistry teacher, stoning the principal's car.

Stick was there several months later when Rex heard of Cry's arrest for possession. Misdemeanors followed, marking her trail across the country like a string of lights: petty theft in Gallup; possession in Phoenix; breaking and entering in Phoenix; possession in Phoenix; vagrancy in Yuma; loitering, trespassing, and possession with intent to sell in San Diego. Soliciting in L.A. It went on until her eighteenth birthday. Then silence.

Rex's older brother Lucas killed himself shortly thereafter. His mother slowly collapsed into a grey state. His father was a corpulent wreck, turning purple at the lips and his swollen nose, his heart one day clenching like an epileptic fist in his chest. Stick had sat beside his best friend at the funeral. At the end of the priest's generic eulogy, Rex stormed the altar, elbowing the priest aside to deliver a diatribe that had been building up within him for years.

"Goddamn sonnofabitch never laid a kind finger on anyone his whole life," he said. "Evilest bastard I ever met. Must've had his conscience suffocated out of him in the birth canal. I got more scars from his goddamn cruelty than I got from chickenpox, puberty, and growing up a small kid in the South Valley combined—and none of them fuckers was kind to me, neither." The priest stood red-faced working his mouth like a landed trout. "He beat my sister till there was only bruise left. He laid his hands on her in every wrong way, and now she's a whore somewhere. My brother put a double-barrel between his lips. And my mother—she's practically a vegetable, numb to everything." He gestured at her out in the crowd staring slant-wise at nothing.

Rex glared across the congregation, grasping the pulpit in his purpled fists. The audience sat breathless, transfixed by that rare moment of candor.

“But—goddamn me—he was all the family I had left.”

Rex stomped from the place, and Stick trailed after him, leaving a vaulted chamber of silence behind.

The officer tramped up in the crazy angle of the rearview, smiling absently to himself, as if he were on a spring-time amble. He ticked out a melody with his fingers on the butt of his service weapon. When he'd walked up to the driver's side window, he leaned an arm on the sill and took in Flowers, in full clown regalia, over the tops of his shades. Stick had retracted his cuffed hands through the window, the right one smeared with white makeup from Flowers's throat.

“What's with all this clownin' around?” the officer asked and leaned back his head for a generous laugh.

Rex guffawed out a fake response. “Oh good one, officer.”

Flowers made a ha-ha-ha sound with what sounded like a case of laryngitis.

The officer mimed wiping a tear from his eye. “You gotta take the easy ones,” he said.

“You got that right. Especially when you're a veteran,” Rex said with a gleam in his creased eye. It was a ploy Stick had seen him use on cops before.

“You boys serve?” The officer cocked his head at the sheepishly grinning Flowers.

“Yessir. Gulf War One,” Rex said.

Flowers nodded.

“Well, I’ll be darned. What branch?”

“Army,” Flowers rasped. He coughed and his voice came out clearer. “36th Infantry.”

“Ah, Texas Division. Navy boy, myself.” He seemed to see Stick looming in the window for the first time. “Whew! And how about you, tall stranger?”

Stick nodded at the man and tried to smile. He was still lost in a world of blood and betrayed lovers and pistols pressed against his forehead.

“Whatsa matter?” The officer took out a top-bound notepad and whipped open the cover. “Cat got your tongue, big fella? Must’ve been a cougar!” He tilted his head back and laughed.

Flowers and Rex followed his lead, giggling and laughing. “Good one, sir,” Flowers said.

“That was a keeper,” Rex affirmed.

“Well boys,” the officer said. “This is just a routine stop. A little erratic driving back there. Weaving, losing traction, driving on the shoulder. A couple of seconds of crossing the center line in a no-passing zone. I was camped out behind a billboard. Thought I’d better make sure everything was hunky.”

Flowers scrunched up his brow and looked at Rex. Rex squinted at the officer.

“Hunky-dory,” the officer clarified.

“Oh yes,” Rex said. “Everything’s—hunky-dory.” Rex pronounced the words as if they were from another tongue too optimistic for his palette.

“License and registration,” the officer said.

Flowers fumbled through the various pouches on his clown suit.

“You boys a traveling show or something?”

“Yep,” Rex said. “Going down to Mexico to do some charity work.”

“For orphans.” Flowers passed his license and papers to the officer and grinned.

“Got a truckload of fun, huh?” The officer inspected Flowers’s license with pursed lips.

“Mind if I have a look?”

“Sure!” Flowers said. “Why here’s a little prop the kids just love.” He drew a rubber chicken from beneath the driver’s seat.

“Oh,” the officer said. “That is just great. That is a classic!” And when he tilted his head back and let out one of his belly laughs Flowers clobbered him on the skull. The chicken made a sick thud on the man’s head. His sunglasses crumpled from his face and he fell from sight.

“Step on it!” Flowers screeched and stepped on it. The truck’s right tires peeled out in the dirt and the left gripped the asphalt and jerked them forward. Stick tumbled back into the bank of freezers and then they were weaving and skidding off down the highway.

“What the hell was that chicken made of?” Rex asked.

“Blackjack chicken!” Flowers caterwauled. “For emergencies only!”

“You’re a goddamned genius!” Rex walloped Flowers on the shoulder.

Stick tried to suspend his weight above a laundry basket of blood that he’d half fallen atop, chained hands grasping at the cupboards above, a foot looped back around the base of the stool. The blood squished under his hip like a waterbed.

“Hang on!” Flowers said. Through the square window, Stick saw the clown’s arms jerk left. The van thumped from the road into dirt that riddled the undercarriage of the truck like bursts of grapeshot. They careened down some country byway, crunching into brush and spitting rocks. Bags of blood leapt in their cradles. Stick struggled and pulled, but couldn’t right himself amidst the chaos.

They rumbled across a cattle guard.

“Watch out!” Rex shouted and a disembodied Rex hand pointed at something beyond Stick’s view.

“Holy moly!” said Flowers and his arms flailed the wheel to the right. The truck jounced and bounded across untamed ground, mauling plants that clawed the truck’s underbelly.

“Slow down!” Rex hollered over the din.

“They’ll be after us!” Flowers said and cranked the wheel right and left. Popsicle sticks, sugar cones, and tiny pink plastic spoons rained down upon Stick from the storage cabinets above, their doors flapping open and slapping shut. The air filled with fluttering paper napkins like a storm of albino moths.

“Jesus!” Rex said.

Something exploded in the front of the truck, a collision, a blown engine, Stick couldn’t tell which. The windshield went black with smoke and the truck rumbled to a halt.

“Oh,” moaned Rex. “You’ve really done it.”

“What happened?” Flowers asked. “Something happened.”

“Goddamn you,” Rex said. “You just fucked us good.”

The truck’s engine was cooked. They spotted a shack in the distance and pushed the vehicle a quarter mile across the rumbly terrain, Stick and Rex pushing from behind, Stick still chained, while Flowers steered in the crook of the door. When they arrived at the shack, they were sweaty, exhausted. Rex and Stick stood behind the truck drinking Capri Suns while Flowers patched the insulation back over the sliding window.

“You still want to go back?” Rex asked.

Stick shook his head. “The police will recognize me in a heartbeat.”

Rex shrugged. “Maybe not. He only saw your head. Maybe he just thought you were a guy with a big head.”

“He’d pick me out of a line up just for my face.”

Rex made a series of small, jerky nods. “Yeah. Probably would. You’re—you’ve got a distinctive bone structure, that’s for sure.” Rex gazed out over the humping plains of desert patched with scrub plants and cacti that cast their shadows long and skeletal in the low sun. “You know,” he said to Stick, “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about her. I know we had our shit. I was an older brother. I picked on her. Helped teach her how the world is. But she’s my *sister*.”

“She asked me not to tell you,” Stick said. “I had to choose.”

“And you chose,” Rex said.

The wind kicked up a half mile across the desert. Stick could see the shape of it from the dust it held. But he felt not a stir where he stood.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” Rex said. “Taking her blood back. What would you do, give it to her? Take it back to the blood bank? One way you get arrested. The other she thinks you’re a psychopath. Walking up to her house with a pint of her own blood.”

“True,” Stick said. “I guess I wasn’t thinking it through.”

“Damn right, you weren’t,” Rex said. “You’re book smart, but you should listen to me more. I understand how the world works.”

Stick nodded, holding his tongue.

“Once we get to Mexico, we’ll make some money and you can try to win her back. You know, flowers and chocolate. Valentines Day. All that shit.” Rex said. “I’ll help you.”

Stick’s insides were roiling, but he kept quiet and nodded.

“So you’re with us, right?” Rex asked. He held the handcuff key between his thumb and forefinger.

Stick nodded.

“Let’s hear you say it.”

Stick sucked in air through his nostrils. “Mexico or bust,” he said.

Rex twisted the key in the cuffs, springing open each bracelet.

Half an hour later, Stick was off, running like a madman across the desert with a trash bag of ice and a pint of blood.

Chapter 9

Two Broken Promises

A week after the State Fair, Stick and Cry met at a cafe. They drank Spanish coffees, milky and sweet, in an enclosed patio that seemed to have been designed especially as a box to catch the sun. Afterward, she invited him to her home.

“We held a vote,” she said. “You’re allowed to come over for dinner.”

They stopped at the grocery store on the way, buying a bag of dried lentils, a bundle of fresh celery, three sweet onions. A loaf of freshly baked bread and a wheel of cheese.

They rolled up to the house, a two-story with a red tiled roof and gray siding. It had a wooden ramp leading up to a dirty porch, crammed full of old sofas the color of dead leaves and reeking of cigarettes. Stick pushed Cry through the front door of the house. He ducked into the space within and was overcome with the sensation of young women and couches. Every wall of the big living room was lined with them, and there were a few slanted obliquely across the middle of the room. When the women saw Cry, a host of home-cut, buzz-scalped, and bed-rumpled heads rose and blinked and cried out, “Cry!” Their kite-shaped faces lit up with the pearly white teeth of youth. Some looked in their teens, others in their twenties, some looked homeless, others underfed, all of them slightly ratty, dirty, some shy, some who looked like they paid rent, others like happy freeloaders, but all of them draped and stretched and sprawled across the many couches. Stick had never seen so many women laying about at such ease before in all his life. As one, they began to stir or spring up from their positions of rest and rush toward the wheelchair—until they took in Stick’s giant form towering behind it.

They stopped short when they laid eyes on his torso, their gazes slowly traveling up to his face.

“Whoa,” said the tallest one, standing front and center before Stick, her mouth agape. The two on either side of her blinked, and one of them uttered, “Dude,” as if it were a word to describe the Divine. Three others had risen to their elbows from where they still lay in tangles of corduroy pants and crazy skirts and a backwards ball-cap or two. Another grimaced from a horizontal position, stiff as a board, as if paralyzed by the surprise of a supernatural being in their midst.

“This is John,” Cry said and the rattle in her throat made sense in this place full of couches and throw rugs and chaos and the residue of reefer smoke and unwashed scalp. The T.V. played a rerun of an old episode of “Charlie’s Angels.” A fan missing one blade turned lazily on the ceiling, spraying the room with lopsided wind. A speckled white and brown dog wearing a red handkerchief trotted up to lick Stick’s pant leg.

“Wow,” said the tall woman in front of Stick. She had a sonorous voice and a faint auburn mustache. “Cry, you weren’t kidding. He’s the tallest man I’ve ever seen.” Following the dog’s lead she stepped close and touched the lapel of Stick’s jacket. “I can’t believe how big his jacket is.”

“Man,” a smaller one said. “Your shoes are wicked-huge.” She stooped to measure Stick’s foot with her hands, rising and gawking at the span held between her palms.

“John, meet everybody. Everybody, meet John,” Cry said, rolling herself forward into the room. The remaining girls had risen from their couches—save the perfectly horizontal one, who just blinked her blue eyes. They all suffered from some malady. One had knees that caved in

toward each other from both sides, giving her a double limp. Another had burn scars bristling both arms to the fingertips; she held her hands before her body like delicate wax replicas, shiny and smooth. Another had two shrunken arms like a Pleistocene predator, while another, whose eyes looked off at blind spots of the room, took in Stick's face with articulate and perceptive fingers. Another was missing a leg altogether, but leapt about on the other one as if on a pogo stick.

They mobbed Cry and Stick, helping them to the least stained couch, and crowding around him to touch his clothes, or shake his hand in a series of codified grasps, snaps, and fist-bumps, or throw an arm up up up and around his shoulders, like a friendly bear-bait. He had never expected a feminist co-op to be so jocular. They unloaded Cry's groceries in a fire-line, passing them, package by package, into the kitchen, where cabinets and refrigerators opened and slammed. As the unloading wound down, two of the women propped the motionless girl up, lifted her into Cry's chair, and carted her off down the hall. She smiled and drooled a little and her blond head lolled and bobbed as if to some secret music.

Cry turned to Stick on the couch. "This is my home," she said. "A few of us get social security disability, so we all live here and kind of help each other out."

"Rejects of the world unite!" one of them said, raising her fist in the air.

"Rejects of the world unite to make me some lentil stew!" Cry said, raising her own shaky fist.

"Hear-hear!" a woman yelled from down the hall.

"Sounds warm!" another voice echoed down through the rafters from a hidden room on the floor above.

As a few of the girls sprung into action in the kitchen and another brought a pair of beers for Cry and Stick, Stick couldn't help marveling at the number of people Cry had in her life—and feel disappointed and betrayed. And when she got up and took a few steps to the bathroom, using two canes for support, Stick saw only his own inevitable abandonment in her slow, limping gait. When she stopped needing him, when she became healed and beautiful again, Stick had no doubt that she would leave him. As they spent the evening laughing with her myriad roommates, eating stew and watching old television shows on pirated cable, and later, when he crammed his long body into her bed, he barely slept a wink for fear of crushing the delicate form curled into his own.

When Stick strode up to his apartment the next morning Rex's truck sat beneath the spread of tree branches across the street. He sat behind the wheel, head tilted back, snoring through his mustache. Stick rapped lightly on the driver's side window.

Rex blinked his eyes open, as if a paste held them shut. He smacked his lips and kneaded his neck with a palm, cranked the window down with stiff winches of his arm.

"Morning," Stick said.

Rex grunted and rubbed at his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Rex said. "All night. And now it's time for you to be straight with me."

Stick had to double over to see in the window. "I'm always straight with you," he said.

"You're holding something from me and it's no better than telling a lie."

Stick sighed and rose. “Come inside,” he said out over the top of the truck. “I’ll brew coffee.”

The Thursday morning neighborhood was bereft of human sound. The periodic rush of cars on distant Coal Avenue. The litter of crow calls. A background music of songbirds hidden in the tree canopy. The two friends filed down the cement staircase to Stick’s garden patio, which buzzed with flies. The spiders in the eaves and among the bushes were like fishermen crouched at the edges of their silken nets.

Stick let Rex inside and gestured at the bar stools. Rex took one and leaned his elbows on the bar. Ralph marched across his terrarium, high-kneed like a slow-motion drum major. Stick got the can down from his cupboard, scooped the grounds of coffee into a filter, settled the cone into his machine. He filled the reservoir with cold water, filled another glass for himself and took a long drink. Held a glass up at Rex, who shook his head. When the machine was sucking up the water with its gurgling clamor, Stick got two mugs down and set them on the bar.

“Hungry?” Stick asked.

Rex shook his head.

“Could make some toast. Beans. Fry up some eggs.”

“Just the coffee.” Rex pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. There was probably an empty whiskey bottle in the cab of his truck.

The urn was half full. Stick removed it carefully from the warmer and the cut-off mechanism clicked into place, stemming the flow inside the cone. Stick poured both mugs full and stuck the urn back on the warmer. The merry trickle resumed. Stick slid a mug across to Rex and sipped at his own.

Rex lifted the mug and bathed his face in the rising steam. “Okay. You made coffee. Now tell me.”

“Nothing to tell,” Stick said. Ralph perched up against the wall of the terrarium, displaying the dun fur of his belly, two pairs of legs against the glass as if he meant to walk up it. It was his way of begging for release.

“Why lie to me?” Rex sighed. “Don’t you think I’d be happy for you?”

Stick sipped his coffee and didn’t know what to say.

“I come to get you to go out for drinks, just me and you, and you’re not there. You’re always home your whole life, and then two times in a row you’re not. I stay all night and you don’t come back until the morning.” He slurped from his mug and sucked the residue from his mustache. “C’mon. You’ve got a woman.”

Stick shrugged. “I guess it’s not a secret anymore.”

He leaned across the bar and his voice cut between them. “Why would you even want to keep it secret? I’m your best friend. Hell, we’re family, me and you. I don’t care if she’s ugly or deformed. Even a retard. You like her, then I’m happy for you. I’ll bring her into the fold like she was kin.”

Stick couldn’t lift his eyes to Rex’s face. “Nice of you to say.”

“I’ll probably even be jealous of you, no matter what she looks like. We’re a couple of lonely old bachelors.”

“We’re not old,” Stick said.

Rex slumped over the bar. “I feel old. I thought I’d have a couple kids by now. Teach ‘em to play catch. Do it right, not like my old man. Thought I’d have a good job, something saved away.” His face looked like crumbling rock. “I live in a motel, for Christ’s sake.”

Stick felt terrible for his friend, who’d lived a life that only brought disappointment. Yet, he also knew that Rex had done very little to better it. Stick finished off his coffee. “Mind if I let Ralph loose?” he asked, thinking the spider’s antics might lighten his friend’s load.

“Go ahead. Ralph’s alright with me.” Rex massaged hairy fingers through his scalp and watched sidelong as Stick slid back the lid and reached down with both hands to take Ralph under the belly with his fingers. He tickled the air with his eight legs as if he were in a giddy free-fall. Stick set him on the carpet and Ralph stood there with his feet planted wide, quivering with pleasure, scanning the myriad overlapping images of the world captured by his compound eyes. Searching for prey.

“I’m just saying,” Rex went on. “I’d be happy for you.”

“Thank you,” Stick said. “I do have someone.”

“I knew it.”

“I’ve been seeing her for a month, maybe more.”

Rex lowered his chin to the bar top in misery. “That’s simply great. Congrats, old buddy.”

Stick came back to where Rex sat like a crumpled towel. He knocked on the bar with his knuckles. Rex looked way up to where he towered. “I have to ask you.”

“What, old pal?”

“You have to promise me. She doesn’t want anyone meeting her. She’s made me say I’d keep all of this a secret. That I wouldn’t bring anyone around.”

“What’s wrong with her? Is she paranoid? Some kind of recluse of something?”

Stick felt tension rise up through his core and clenched his fists beneath the bar. “Promise me. She just doesn’t want to see anyone or meet anyone. Promise me you’ll leave her alone.”

“Leave her alone? What am I going to do, go and harass her?”

Stick felt like violence would erupt out of him if Rex said another word about her, or feigned as if he weren’t capable of seeking her out and discovering who she was. “Just promise. I never ask you for anything.”

Rex was still draped on the bar, looking up. “Alright. No big deal. I promise.”

But Stick knew that the world was built on broken promises.

Rex and Flowers wandered among the wreckage the ostrich rancher had left behind her. The tires of the ice cream truck had all been slit. The rancher had upended the water supplies on the ostrich cart, dumped the bag flour, dried fruit and nuts, the jerky across the yard. The ostriches had eaten most of it, including meat made of their own kin. Two of the birds were gone. The woman had probably rushed off, not wanting to draw the men’s attention by taking all of them. But she hadn’t been too rushed to drag one of her boot heels through the dirt in the shape of a skull and crossbones.

“She must have had a knife hidden on her,” Flowers reasoned, back inside the shack.

“Did you search her?” Rex asked.

“Kind of,” Flowers said. “I mean, I checked her for a gun. And I found a clasp knife on her belt and figured that’d be it. Who carries two knives around?”

“Ranchers,” Stick said.

“Right, ranchers,” Flowers admitted and sighed. “Well, it looks like she’s pretty pissed.”

Rex just glared at Flowers, his mustache quivering.

“Guess we’d better get moving, huh Rex?” he said. “She’ll probably be back with the cops, or a bunch of crazy sharp-shooting cowboys.” He giggled.

Rex breathed out a few furious breaths through his flared nostrils, his jaw clenching as if chewing something very tough. “You, you,” he stammered. And then he walked out of the shack, leaving Flowers and Stick alone in the kitchen.

“I guess he’s kinda pissed too, huh?” Flowers said.

“Yes,” Stick said. Rex had probably rushed outside to inflict violence on an inanimate object. Rex was the kind of man who couldn’t just vent. He had to destroy something.

“Probably, I’ll just stay in here for a little while and let him blow off some steam,” Flowers said. He sat on the little table, his vinyl-suited haunches spreading wide on the flat surface, the silver pistol jutting out of his pocket. He wore a little half-smile like a guilty child.

Stick shifted his long legs on the floor, curling his body sideways and moving his arms from their folded position behind his head to grip the pipes in his fists and hang his forearms in the cavity below the sink. He kept his head turned toward Flowers. The clown looked out the window over Stick’s head.

“Those birds, it’s like they’re from another world,” Flowers said. “I should have joined the circus instead of going into the army. Zebras, ostriches, camels. What a life.”

That was the life I used to have, thought Stick. Maybe there would be a zoo in Mexico that would be happy to take in an experienced animal-keeper like Stick. He spoke a little Spanish, inherited haphazardly from his father, could learn more. It might be a very happy life,

working in a zoo in Mexico City. Maybe he could even join a circus—they must need caretakers for the animals. Carnivals might have snake houses or monitor lizards that would require someone with reptile expertise.

Rex came back an hour later. “I’ve packed us up,” he said. He was all business, his rage abated. “The ostrich cart is stuffed with insulation and ice from the truck, all the plasma, and some O-negative,” he said. “Flowers, gather your stuff. We’re moving out.”

“Okay,” said Flowers. He stood there looking from Rex to Stick.

Rex gave him a smoldering look.

“Okay! Going!” And Flowers trotted out the door.

Rex stood looking down at Stick. His chest was bare, his eyes drooping within rings of sleepless bruise. “How’d we get here, man?” he asked.

Stick shrugged in his chains. “Maybe we deserve it.”

“No, I mean me and you.” Rex sighed big and his shoulders slumped lower when it was done. “Used to be no matter what, we were there for each other. Now look at us. How many times in the past two days have I wanted to shoot you?”

“You tell me,” Stick said, thinking of the wound blossoming in Rex’s armpit.

“At least twice.” Rex shook his head. “It’s not easy. Forgiving.”

“I forgive you.” Stick meant it, though it didn’t change his intention to right the wrong he’d committed. He forgave his friend for holding him at gunpoint, chaining him up as a prisoner, for not letting him run away with Cry’s blood. But that didn’t change his resolve.

Rex gave him a hard look. “No, I meant it’s not easy for me to forgive you. If you’d run back to Albuquerque and given us away, who knows how long they’d do us for? We’d have to go to Mexico and never come back. It’s serious—assaulting a police officer with a deadly weapon.”

“A deadly chicken,” Stick said and they both broke into laughter that wouldn’t stop. Rex turned to lean his head against the wall, his shoulders heaving with the spasms of laughter. Stick’s chains jingled as his own laughter rumbled out of him. It took them several minutes to get it out, and when they finally did they were both out of breath. Stick’s face was cramped from smiling.

“At least Flowers is good for something,” Rex said.

“Yes,” Stick said.

“That guy is a laugh if he’s anything.”

“True,” Stick said and felt suddenly terrible for the clown, who tagged after Rex and Stick like an eager terrier. “He’s funny in the saddest way I’ve ever seen.”

Rex nodded. “So. If I let you go, do you swear you’re back on our team?”

Stick nodded. “I’ll get you to Mexico. I’ll do what I can for that bite. And you give me her blood.”

“What the hell are you going to do with it?” Rex asked, throwing up his hands. “I mean, sure. It’s yours. No problem. But do you really think it’ll make a difference? She probably doesn’t even know it’s gone.”

“We’ve got to be all over the news,” Stick said. “A crime like this—it will go national.”

Rex pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah. True.” He looked off out the window and smiled, as if imagining himself on national news.

“And she gave blood there. She’s got to know it could be gone.”

“Right,” Rex said. “Still, she doesn’t know it was you.”

“I’m the only giant in Albuquerque,” Stick said.

Rex ignored him and went on. “And what good would it do? No hospital will take a bag of random blood brought in by a stranger, so you can’t get it to anybody in this country who can use it. But in Mexico—”

“It’s the principle,” Stick said.

“Fair enough.” Rex sighed. “You do what you want. We get to Mexico and you get the blood.”

“Done.”

“You promise you’re on our side?”

Stick forced himself to look Rex in the eye. “I promise.”

“Alright. But I’m gonna warn you once more. You go back to Albuquerque, you’re cooked. The cops will find you. Plus, what do you have to go back to?”

It was true. Before he’d ever agreed to the blood heist, he’d lost Cry and the thing most precious to him in the world.

Chapter 10

The Fire

Months before the heist, Stick had emerged from his apartment below the earth to walk to work. The sky was turquoise. The early morning sun shone through the silvered spider webs in his little garden, casting shadows too fine for any human eye to discern. But Stick knew that the weavers themselves could see them, their patterning the ground with intricate geometry. The scale of perception corresponded to the scale of the eye; small creatures could perceive details of this world that no human ever could. Stick at seven-foot-three, took comfort in knowing that the more people stared, the more they missed. If only he could take every gawker gently by the shoulder and steer them to the bizarre life in the undergrowth, between the blades of grass, burrowed into the loose dirt among the weeds, packed into every inch of this world beyond fathom.

He strode west toward the zoo, his knapsack bouncing lightly on his shoulder, his legs eating an easy meter of sidewalk at a stride. He crossed the bridge that spanned the old, abandoned train yard, the dull rails sunken into the earth like the tracks of an extinct creature. Engines sat in forlorn lines, blunt and forever still. The boxcars were hexed with gang-sign graffiti. At the top of the bridge Stick paused, as he did almost every morning, to look down at the rail yard, that strange channel through the city, like the bones of an extinct waterway.

When he turned west again he saw the first sign of smoke, a puff of black above the horizon of the city. From the bridge he could see over the top of Albuquerque, which, what with limitless desert to expand into, was a place of only one and two story buildings, save for

downtown. Stick peered at the puff of black, growing, rising above the green patch that demarcated the zoo from the surrounding brown city. As he broke into a jog, the puff became a column, drawing a dark line in the sky.

He drew nearer and the column rose, larger in height, larger in perspective, until he sprinted through the park, into the parking lot, where people milled, parents turning their children away or hoisting them atop shoulders to give them better vantage, these strange double-humans that towered above the world with cherub faces. Stick dodged through cars rearing into the crowd, blinking angry brake lights at the chaos. A fire engine wailed in the distance.

Stick leaped the turnstiles, barely breaking stride. He cleared the awning over the ticket entry and broke left past the flamingo pool. Zoo employees clustered around the Reptile House, several of them spraying water at its smoking flanks with long, green hoses. It was a windowless building, completely enclosed for light and climate control, and smoke poured from the seams of the building in thick tendrils, licked by flames that had burned through the ceiling. The entrance, beyond the little foyer with the tile coin pool and spider monkey cage, black smoke gushed as from a wound.

Stick charged for it, blind to every detail of the world around him. In his mind, animals gasped in the smoke, screamed and rolled in shrouds of flame. He split through the line of zookeepers as if they were tall grass. Jake Kentucky, Stick's boss, stepped in front of him with his arms outstretched, hopelessly, as if he were trying to stop a bus. Stick lifted him from his feet and hurled him into the flamingo pool. Angel, chief of security, leapt on Stick's back and dangled from his neck like a child, her fingers braided about his throat. Principio, the lion keeper, charged

in from the side, grasping at Stick's waist. All around him people yelled, *Stick, no. It's no use, Stick.*

With a grave crumple, a section of the roof collapsed, releasing a fury of flame. Sparks leapt out to burn like disembodied and infernal eyes on the cement walkway. Stick spun and shook, took labored steps toward the entrance, Principio, a linebacker in high school, at his waist and Angel yanking on his neck and pleading in his ear, *Stick, Stick.* He pried at Angel's fingers, and unable to break their grip, took them in his palm and squeezed that braid of fragile bones until they crumpled and Angel fell away. He seized Principio's mane of thick black hair in that same grip, raised the head and smashed his other fist into the center of Principio's broad and youthful face. He too fell away.

Stick plunged into the blackness, crouching as low as his great height would allow. The stinging smoke forced his eyes closed even before he passed the doorway. As he crossed the threshold, his mind threw off the blind drive it had had as he'd rushed through the line of his colleagues, and he achieved a crystalline presence, as if his suffering body, his stinging eyes, his choking throat and gasping lungs, were things far away. He realized he should have taken a bigger breath before he entered this place, that he should have brought a fire blanket or extinguisher or vessel to bear out his creatures, but it was too late, and he would have to forge ahead.

The vestibule between the first set of doors and the second was about two paces across. He made them quickly and blindly, his extended hand finding the handle as if it were part of his body, so well did he know this place. The metal singed his palm as he threw open the door and

rushed down the left branch, away from the heat and tumultuous basso of the inferno. The right side of the building had already collapsed on dozens and dozens of creatures.

In the first room the frogs were screaming. He blinked open his eyes and found the air clearer there, away from the entrance, which had become nothing more than an escape route for trapped smoke. The corridor to the next room, domed like the tunnel of a cave with plaster and internal beams, led to a realm of fire and heat. Molten plaster sloughed from the walls. Within that hollow space between the regular walls and the domed cave tunnels the fire rumbled and sparked. It was the perfect habitat for fire: a dry, spare space cross-hatched with planks of tinder.

The far side of the room was on the verge of being lost. Smoke poured through apertures burned at the upper extremity of the wall where it met the ceiling. The blond tarantula was pressed against the side of her terrarium, frozen in a posture of escape. The Sumatran millipedes had twined together to die at the bottom of their cage, their shiny carapaces reflecting the raging heat. The moccasin twisted her thick body desperately against the glass, pressing as far up the side of her cage as she could and falling back into the bed of bark chips, which had begun to smolder beneath her golden, looping body. These terrariums were no longer homes; they were ovens.

Stick reared back and kicked though the glass. The walls were thick, strong enough to resist any impact likely to occur within or without, but Stick's foot plunged through to the ankle. The moccasin buried her fangs in the thick leather of his shoe. Stick dragged his foot back through the opening he'd kicked, slicing his ankle on the jagged edges, dragging the moccasin through as well. Her fangs had become lodged in his shoe and she wagged and twisted her body trying to free her mouth, hissing in fear. Stick wrapped his hands around her chest and pulled her

fangs free as gently as he could, despite the heat and fire and smoke, and the clumsy rush of adrenaline in his muscles. He wiggled her free and she struck him again and again on the wrists and forearms until finally he got a firm grip around her neck just behind the jaw and held her there, her long body jilting and jerking as she hung from his hand.

He moved to the next cage and kicked it in. The two skinks cowered away from his huge foot, hiding amidst the foliage on the far side of the terrarium. He jerked his foot out and took each skink, their long, moist bodies hotter than he'd ever felt them before, from the cage and eased one into each pocket of his trousers. A gust of smoke huffed into the room from the corridor and Stick could no longer crouch low enough to keep it from his eyes and could barely fight them open to break through the front of the box turtle's terrarium, the dry branches at the back of his cage already aflame. He'd retracted into his shell and didn't stir as Stick clasped his body under one arm like a football and stumbled back through the entrance, going blind again in that fount of smoke. He forgot to hold his breath and took in a huge lungful of poisonous air. It felt like he'd taken fire inside of his body. He lurched through the doubled doors, shattering a pane of exterior glass with his shoulder as he blundered. The burns in his nostrils and throat choked him and his lungs were afire as he tripped into the shin-high wall surrounding the foyer outside the Reptile House and crashed through the brush into the planter beyond.

He lay vomiting and choking up bile and fighting free of the clawing sticks and brambles until several of his co-workers dragged him out onto the cement walkway, clear of the building. Stick tried to open his eyes as the building crashed down, sirens blared, and firemen shouted. But the only action he could manage was to choke. Of the snapping turtle and the moccasin, he no longer had any awareness. He couldn't discern the difference between his coworkers attempting

to hold him on his side so he would not asphyxiate on the effluvia spewing from his mouth and nose and the paramedics who did the same, until finally his brain surrendered to venom and smoke and he lost consciousness.

When he awoke at the Presbyterian Hospital his lungs felt shredded. His throat and nose drizzled blood, which he was forced to swallow or spit forth every few minutes. Each breath was a process of exertion and pain. Jake Kentucky came to see him and assured him, no hard feelings, everyone knew how important the animals in that house were to him. But there was a wariness, a physical distance that Kentucky placed between himself and Stick. A refusal to meet Stick's gaze.

When Stick was released later that day he slipped on his trousers and found the two skinks, dead and cold in his pockets. He reached through the flap of the trash container in the hall of the hospital and laid them in the invisible litter within. Outside, the sun was bright. as if today were any other day. He was closer to Cry's house than his own, so he began to walk there, his body stinking of smoke and wracked with cough. The mile and a half took him an hour to walk. He stopped to sit on park benches and regain his breath. He bought a bottle of water at a Circle K that he eventually threw away, so painful was it to swallow.

He arrived at her quiet street of ramshackle houses to find Rex's truck already there. His friend was pounding on the door of her home and trying to peer through the window into the living room. Stick broke into a jog that caused a fit of coughing, doubling him over. He staggered up the steps to her porch where Rex yelled and hammered.

Rex turned as Stick reached to take him by the shoulder. "There you are," he said. "I heard about the fire. I was worried. I thought you might be here." He turned and punched the door. "He's here," he screamed into the crack between the door and the jamb. "I found him, no thanks to you." The house's interior was silent.

Stick felt sick. He thought he might vomit there, through the cracks of the porch's wooden planking. "What are you doing here?" The words tore at his throat.

"I followed you," Rex said. "The other day. I wanted to see where you were, at least. You know, as your friend."

"You shouldn't have done that," Stick rasped. "You promised."

"Well." He shrugged. "It's an emergency," Rex said. "I thought maybe you were in the hospital and your girlfriend would be able to tell me." He turned back to yell at the house. "But she won't even open the door! I'm just here to help my friend!"

Stick took him by the elbow. "Come on," he said. It was obvious that Rex hadn't spotted Cry yet, or Stick would have already heard about it. "Let's go."

"Fine," Rex said. "We'll go. But I don't like being treated like this. I'm Stick's best friend!" he bellowed up at the house, his voice echoing across the quiet street.

The cop car pulled up as the two men were coming down the front steps.

"Shit," said Rex.

They spent the weekend in jail. He and Rex were put into separate cells. On Monday morning, as he stood in the arraignment line outside the courtroom, two plainclothes cops sauntered up to him.

"You must be John Stick," the little one said around a wad of blue gum.

Stick nodded once.

The gum-chewing cop jerked his head at the larger one, who unlocked Stick's handcuffs.

"The ladies at 311 Edith Avenue have dropped the charges," the gum-chewer said.

"You're free to go."

The big cop had Stick's cuffs off and Stick rubbed his sore wrists where they'd bitten into his skin.

"Whatsamatter with his wrists?" the big cop asked.

The gum-chewer took a look at Stick's wrists and squinted up at him. "Say, what is the matter with your wrists?"

"Too tight," Stick said.

"Jeez," said the big cop. "You shoulda told somebody."

Stick shrugged. "It's fine."

The gum-chewer edged in closer to Stick, arching his neck to look him in the eye. "We got plastic restraints, buddy," he said. "What're ya, trying to make us look bad? Police brutality type of thing?"

Stick sunk his hands into his pockets, hiding his wrists from view. "Am I free to go?" he murmured.

The gum-chewer tapped a hard nub of finger against the bone of Stick's sternum, creating a sick, hollow thump that vibrated through Stick's torso. "You are not to bother those ladies anymore. I tried to get 'em to sign a restraining order against you. They wouldn't do it. But if we get another complaint about you—or your friend—coming around there, I'll personally bust your

ass. I don't care how huge you think you are. I've made a career of busting up guys twice my size. Haven't I?"

The big cop nodded. "He really has."

Stick heaved a big breath. His throat was still raw and his lungs wheezed with every inhalation.

The gum-chewer narrowed his eyes. "Get it?" he hissed.

"Yes," Stick said. "What about my friend?"

The cop dropped his finger and stepped back. "They're pressing charges against him," he said. "Harassment, trespassing, breaking and entering, willful destruction of property. Restraining order against him if nothing else. *And* if I ever see him in the street, I'll bust his ass. Personally." His big partner gave another nod, as if the smaller detective had made a point he agreed with. "You, however, are free to go. Lieutenant Blue here will give you some paperwork to sign." He walked away, leaving Stick alone with the big cop, who showed Stick the various charges against him that had been dropped. When Stick had signed forms acknowledging receipt, he walked from the holding area of the court through the grand foyer with its columns and two-stories of glass windows looking down the wide, stone staircase onto the city street below. Outside, the daylight was blinding.

Chapter 11

The Cottonwood Tree

“I’m still going back,” Stick said. Outside the shack, Flowers slammed a door of the truck and his footsteps crunched through the dirt toward them. “I have to do something. I love her.”

Rex absently smacked one fist against his palm. “That’s hard for me to hear, as her brother.”

“It’s true.”

Rex looked away. “Okay. You love my sister. Fine.”

“I’m sorry. I think I’ve been in love with her since we were children. I’ll ride with you to Mexico, and then I’m going back to the city.”

“Fair enough,” Rex said. “Your decision.” Without further preamble he crouched down in front of Stick and pulled the little handcuff key from his pocket. He snapped open the cuff on Stick’s right arm. It was so numb, so weak, so sore from hanging by the wrist or the fist that it fell to the floor like a dead thing. Then, before he even had the presence of mind to anticipate it, the little blue straw and the dead cricket tumbled from his sleeve onto the linoleum. The tip of the straw was still coated with the bright green residue of Rex’s deodorant stick.

Rex’s eyes flicked down and took in the bug and the straw. He sprang back, clear of Stick’s free arm, as if it, the limp, powerless appendage, were a threat to him.

“What’s wrong?” Flowers asked, walking in at that moment.

“Cover him!” Rex yelled.

Flowers drew his pistol and backed up against the wall. He raised the gun in both hands, sighting Stick down the muzzle with one eye pinched shut. “What is it? What’s wrong? Should I shoot?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“That spider,” Rex said.

Stick wanted nothing more than to cover the straw up with his hand, to sweep the cricket under the cabinet or flick it skittering off over the linoleum. But to do so would be to confirm Rex’s suspicions. So he just lay there, flexing and rotating his freed arm.

But with Rex staring him down, looking more furious than Stick’d ever seen him before, Stick knew he was already discovered. He’d never been able to disguise what was going through his mind and he lay there on the linoleum and felt his guilt pour out of his face. He was unable to break gazes with Rex. Finally, feeling the heat in his cheeks and forehead, burning his ears and neck, Stick turned away.

“What?” Flowers whined. “What’d I miss? C’mon guys, what’s happening?”

The rage boiled out of Rex and he jammed his middle and pointer fingers up Stick’s nose. He pulled Stick up that way—“Get up, get up!”—his fingers tearing into the tissue in the back of Stick’s nostrils, Stick struggling to a lopsided stance, his cuffed arm an anchor. Stick’s nose stretched and crackled inside of his face. Rex yanked and Stick resisted and blood poured warm over Stick’s lips and down his chin. Rex leaned down and unlocked the other cuff and Stick’s arms were too weak and numb to do anything but grasp at Rex’s bare shoulders, as his friend dragged him across the tile, over the door jamb, and out into the dirt. Stick slid and scuffled, on his knees, standing, tripping, shuffling half-risen and half-fallen. Rex hauled him to the big cottonwood tree, where the woman’s ropes lay severed at its roots, like shed garments. Rex

raised Stick to his feet with his two fingers, as if curling a weight. His face twisted like a strongman undergoing great exertion. Flowers hovered and flit around them, bulbous and bee-like, asking over and over, “What? What’d I miss?”

“Go get the cuffs,” Rex growled at him and Flowers scampered back to the shack.

Stick’s arms began to gain feeling as he dangled there on Rex’s upraised hand, and he clasped both of them around Rex’s grip on his nose and was about to squeeze that hand to shards when he felt the edge of Rex’s bowie knife, a thin line of cold pressed against his Adam’s apple. He felt the desperate need to swallow, but thought that to do so would be to slit his own throat. He released his grip on Rex’s hand, pinched the bridge of his nose to slow the bleeding.

Flowers came back with the cuffs and they stretched Stick’s arms and shoulders back and around the tree and fastened him there, the metal circlets pinching into his wrists.

Rex stood back and stared at Stick. Stick stretched the muscles in his legs and hips, thankful at least to be standing upright.

“Can I please know what the hell is going on?” Flowers begged. “Please?”

“Bastard planted that spider in my deodorant. Caught it and planted it,” Rex said.

Flowers’s face lit up. “I told you he was no good! Didn’t I?”

Rex yanked at the chains, circling the trunk and looking up at the branches as if to make sure there was no way Stick could somehow scale it and climb over the top to freedom. Not a foot above Stick’s head the tree expanded into a globe of branches nearly as wide as the shack.

“Didn’t I say he was a traitor?” Flowers said. “He broke the brotherhood!”

Rex was beyond speech, prowling the yard still in a rage. Stick had seen his friend’s rage many times before. Usually someone ended up with a black eye, a split lip, a tire-iron through

the windshield. But this time Stick worried it would go further. Flowers's statement earlier about the military standing people up against walls to execute them rang in his memory, and he thought that a tree was like a wall.

Rex went into the ice cream truck and when he came back out it wasn't with a rifle. He came out with a double armful of blood. Without looking Stick in the face, he handed two sacks to Flowers, lay a few in the dirt. The sky behind Rex was fairytale blue with a few bubbles of cloud suspended like white magic. The sun lit up Rex's hair into glittery silver tinsel.

"What're we doing?" asked Flowers. He had a plump bag of blood in each hand and was dancing from one foot to the other.

Rex drew his knife and held a sack of blood in his other fingertips. He sliced halfway through the top, above the level of blood within, sawing through the plastic and dribbling blood over the top of the quivering bag. Just like he'd cut the seams from the Capri Sun bags earlier. Blood dribbled on the sand, fading from crimson to burgundy as it soaked into mud. Flowers, apparently on to Rex's plan, pulled his switchblade out and lay his bag face-up on his palm, like he was holding a baby in his hand. He poked the point of his blade through the plastic pouch and a drop of blood welled up and spilled to the crook of his pinkie and ring fingers.

Rex took his bag with both hands around the middle and pitched it at Stick like a bucket of water. It splashed across his waist and trickled cold into his pants and boxer shorts. Rex wound up and threw the near-empty bag with a splat into Stick's chest. It fell to the dirt like a jellyfish. Rex held up his bloodied palms and studied them blankly.

Flowers took an end of his bag in each hand and tilted the bag up and squirted a stream of blood onto Stick's shoulder. The blood cold and viscous as it slid down his arm. Correcting his

aim, Flowers squeezed another burst into Stick's face, the stream breaking below his right eye and coursing down his cheek, into his lips. He spat and flicked at the sweet droplets with his tongue, hoping it wasn't hers.

"Damn," Rex said to Flowers, "your method is much better than mine."

"Squirting flower principle," Flowers said. "Small hole, high pressure." He squirted a final weak stream over Stick's head and dropped the bag in the dirt. He walked Rex through his bag puncturing and squirting process and when they were finished, several bags later, Stick stood there, saturated and cold. The two men mounted up, Rex in the lead with a line that drew the ostrich cart team behind him, Flowers bringing up the rear. Stick watched the birds trot south on legs cast into spindling shadows by the setting sun. Then they were gone.

Stick stood there in the silent desert. They'd left him as prey, to be tortured and ravished by the bloodsuckers of the earth. To die of thirst and crumple around the base of the ancient cottonwood. To waste into a skeleton, his body picked away by the hungry denizens of the desert until he was a pile of bones for someone to discover, many years in the future. Who, they might wonder, had these giant bones belonged to? And what sort of life had he led?

Chapter 12

Trapped

The temperature swooped when dusk came. Stick stood with his back pressed to the tree trunk for warmth. Ants, exploring this new addition to the tree, tickled his neck and biceps until the land was dark, when they retreated to their mazes below the ground. Evening brought other creatures from their lairs. The mosquitoes that had been plaguing the men for days returned in fleets, gathering in a cloud around Stick to take turns alighting on his body to drink. Eventually he became too tired to thrash them away any more, and when sated they sat resting on his skin, their bellies bright with blood.

Far off, a dog called into the night. Its bark echoed off the mountains in tortured reverberations. Coyotes giggled and yowled replies from the south. Elk bulged from the mountains. A hawk poked its face from its nest in the eaves of the shack and screamed. An owl hooted, invisible in the branches of the cottonwood above. The dog—Stick couldn't tell the breed or size—barked again, and its hellish voice seemed to agonize every animal for miles, instigating a cacophonous outcry from across the desert. It was unlike any night that Stick had ever spent in the desert before. It was as if the torment of a single animal had driven the whole desert mad.

When dawn came, Stick was wilted against the tree trunk, pale and exhausted. He would not last another night in the cold, beset by blood-suckers, beleaguered by the strange dog's howling. But even to make it to the night, he'd have to weather the day. A person could die of thirst in a matter of hours in the desert, and Stick had no prospects of water. He did have the

shade of cottonwood to shelter beneath. And around him for hundreds of miles, monsters—scaled, leather-winged, fanged, and venomous—crouched in similar shelter, under wiry-limbed bushes, in caves, amidst clutches of cacti, beneath rocks stippled with the fossils of beasts that had taken similar solace there millions of years before.

When Stick returned home from jail, his apartment below the ground was silent. Ralph had receded into a quiet hairy mound in a corner of his enclosure, hibernating over the long weekend that Stick had spent in jail. Stick dug a few crickets from his garden and bounced them into the cage. The insects lay dirty and moist on their sides, as if freshly birthed. Ralph's forelegs stirred as the vibrations woke him.

Stick lay on his long sectional couch, the only piece of furniture he'd owned that was long enough for him to stretch out on. He was too exhausted to eat, to bathe the jail from his body, even to take off his shoes. He just lay on the couch and failed to fall asleep. The sun stretched the shadows of the pines around his garden into monsters, prickled with spikes, taller and taller, the spikes growing longer and more menacing, until the sun set and the shadows vanished into the greater darkness of night. Stick lay there as the moon radiated the patio with its feeble white, lay there as the life of night awoke, skittering along the panels of his walls, caught in his spider escape-proof room, twittering in the trees outside. Ralph roused himself too, to stalk and suck the life out of the crickets, which scuffled and scratched weakly in the cedar chips before Ralph pinned and executed them.

When the sun rose, casting the shadow of the house across his patio in a block of residual darkness, and casting the street beyond into gold, Stick still lay unsleeping. He wondered if he'd

lost the capacity to sleep altogether. When he arose, his legs felt attached by remote control, and he stumbled on his way to the bathroom. When he got there and switched on the light, he saw a stooped frame in a white t-shirt with yellowed armpits. Arms twisted with harsh knots of elbow and clots of muscle at the upper biceps and forearm, the wrists and lower biceps like places afflicted with pestilence. Brown skin stippled with thick brown hairs. Eyes like black stones thrown in a pool, skin rippled and sagging, cheeks sunken below bones that rose sharp above his beard like peaks beyond the tree-line, devoid of life. Teeth a jagged, yellowed mess, lips sloughing skin like a snake too sickly to molt properly. Threadbare hair. The mirror reflected one of the ugliest men he'd ever seen.

Stick left the mirror. He went to the kitchen. Under the sink he had a big can of black paint. He got out the paint, a brush, a screwdriver. He took them into the bathroom and pried off the lid. He set it on the seat of the toilet. He dipped the brush in the can and painted the mirror in broad, careful brushstrokes. The paint beaded and ran at first, and he smoothed and thickened it, until no gleam of silver showed. He moved to the full-length mirror that had come mounted to his closet door. Painted that. He coated the face of the microwave and the oven. He caught reflections of his ugly body, like ghosts, in the windows overlooking his patio as he covered the glass of the framed picture he had of an albino rattlesnake—painted them, too. When he'd finished, he gave it all a second coat. The paint was nearly gone before he saw phantom movement on his television screen. He had just enough to turn that from dull grey to flat black.

When he'd finished, Stick carefully cleaned his brush with turpentine and took the shoebox of photographs from beneath his bed. He set it on the bar that separated his kitchen from his living room. Outside, he gathered twigs and pine needles from the litter layer beneath the

skirts of his trees and fluffed them into a small pile in his sink. He started it with a kitchen match and blew gently into the sparks until they caught. He stood over the fire and added clusters of photos like hands of cards, folded. Black smoke trailed up in tendrils thick like the appendages of some tortured creature. It smelled like poison. Stick stood and breathed it in, stoked it. Little Johnny Stick in a rusted red wagon with sandy bangs in his eyes. Little Stick standing in a yard of dirt looking at a grey cat. Stick in his third grade photo as tall as his teacher. Stick sitting at the wheel of his father's green Datsun in the snow, the trees in the background as spindly and brown and knobby as the boy's hands gripping the wheel. Stick's crooked mother holding him in her twisted arthritic hands just before she died. Stick's father smoking a cigarette in the yard with 13-year-old Stick towering over him. Stick at his high school graduation, the robe sweeping at Stick's knees, looking past the camera at something out of view, a frown on his long face.

Stick fed the pictures in until they were all reduced to black husks. Like the skin shed from a snake made of ash. The ceiling inches above Stick's hair rippled in concentric circles of black that could never be cleaned. As the fire died, Stick, dizzy and dazed from breathing in his own incinerated image, staggered to the couch and lay down to sleep.

He didn't sleep. He lay there visualizing, terrarium by terrarium, his creatures. When the phone rang, toward sunset, he unplugged it and buried it in his garden beneath the tallest pine. He took the answering machine apart into a hundred tiny pieces and ground them up in his garbage disposal until it started to smoke. He unraveled the millions of feet of black ribbon from the machine's tape—with her tortured voice wound into its magnetic structure—and piled it in a corner along with the ripped-up documents the police had given him. He lifted Ralph from his

terrarium—the spider calm from his meal of crickets—and set him on the carpet, vowing never again to put him back in the terrarium.

Ralph didn't bed down in the nest Stick had made for him. Instead he dragged his slain victims there and devoured them, leaving the less savory parts in the twisting shiny loops and shards of blue paper and white paper. Stick spent hours lying on his couch watching Ralph. He failed to sleep. He ate at least once per day. He sipped water and didn't watch nature documentaries. A week into his isolation he unplugged his T.V. and took it apart. He removed the picture tube and filled the vacancy with soil. When he placed it back on the T.V. stand he was pleased by the new weight it seemed to bring to the room. It was as if the entire gravity of his home had tilted toward this cube full of the earth. Stick started watching Ralph less and staring more often at the soil-filled television, with its dead-black screen. Even Ralph seemed to notice the difference. He would climb the T.V. stand and tick at the screen with his front legs. As if there were another world inside that could be accessed.

Stick didn't leave his house underground until the food ran out. His pantry was stacked with cans. Bins of rice, flour, sugar, cornmeal, crushed things white, beige, and brown that could be cooked. He drank water from his glasses until they all wore collars of smudges from his lips. When the glasses were all dirty, stacked in dangerous towers around his countertops, he sipped from the dented tin cups that he used to take on his overnight journeys into the wilderness. He ate from plates, bowls, pots, old ashtrays that he saved for when Rex came over to smoke and talk about women. He piled his food on cookie sheets. He ate from the glass plate that rotated in the bottom of his microwave, he irradiated things over and over on this plate, and the old food turned into a dark mealy crust on it, dark like layers shed from fire coals. Stick assumed they

were safe to eat a little of, or he wanted them to make him sick, or he had just given up caring altogether. The only thing he still took seriously was his responsibility to Ralph, who feasted on various many-legged delicacies that Stick unearthed from his patio and released in the living room, which had impenetrable base boarding, a coliseum for doomed gladiators to battle the giant spider.

Ralph ran amok. He slept on Stick's chest or on his knee or sometimes in Stick's hair until Stick found his belly hairs too wiry and shooed the spider away. Ralph perched atop the refrigerator, where he would leap at the lazy whirlwind of fruit flies that spun endlessly over Stick's array of unwashed dishes. Sometimes Ralph got lost among the dishes, stalking little brown cockroaches that ventured into the pillars of dirty glasses to scavenge the hardened scraps. One day the spider disappeared for almost an entire day and Stick found him trapped beneath an overturned bowl. After that Ralph stayed away from the booby-trapped area around the sink and stuck to the vast flatlands of Stick's floor, where millipedes and crickets and earwigs and cockroaches and the occasional small snake roamed.

When the food ran out, Stick prepared to leave the apartment. It took him a day. He had to get up from the couch. He had to change clothes. Then he had to take off his clothes and shower his body, which took him an hour. He had to find new clothes and wonder what his hair looked like, how long it had been since he'd brushed his mossy teeth, what would happen when he saw the sun. Would the birds flock around him, pecking at his barnacled lips and trying to carry away his fingers? What would the stockers of shelves say to a huge, pale man stalking among the shelves filling a basket with cans? What would the checkout girl say as he piled up his stack of potatoes, carrots, radishes, yams, rutabaga, a man who ate only things once buried.

Spartacus Rex showed up as Stick was sitting on his couch tying his shoelaces. Rex clomped down Stick's stairs across the bricks of his patio and banged on the front door. Stick froze, doubled over his shoelaces.

"How come your phone's not ringing?" Rex bellowed, having opened Stick's screen door and made a cone for his hands to peer through the glass. It was the only window Stick hadn't painted because it was shielded by a white drape, through which Stick could make out the vague shape of his best friend's mustachioed face, framed by his huge hands.

Stick thought that maybe if he sat very still, low as he was to the ground, Rex might not see him.

"Hey!" Rex shouted. "I just got out of jail. Hey!"

Ralph hid beneath the T.V. stand, peering out at the intruder, his multiplicitous eyes gleaming from the shadows.

"Hey! They have a restraining order against me! They think I'm dangerous—what a laugh!" Rex hollered. "Hey! Hey! I know you're in there!"

Stick rose, ever so slowly, and Rex's eyes immediately fixed on him through the haze of the curtain. "You look like shit!" Rex yelled. Stick unlocked the door to let him in. Rex stepped over the doorjamb and swept the room with his furry-browed gaze. He took in the jungle of dishes, the nest of desiccated corpses Ralph had built in the corner of the room, the T.V. full of soil, the windows and mounted pictures black with paint. Rex's nostrils flared and he winced.

"Damn," Rex said. "I thought you had a girlfriend."

Stick looked down at his half-tied shoelaces.

“You’d think she would’ve made you clean up,” Rex said in a flat voice, as if he were probing Stick for information. “You know, because chicks usually don’t let us live as filthy as we want to.” He stared at Stick a few seconds and Stick tried to look him in the eyes and failed. “I hope she—I mean, I hope you guys aren’t broken up.”

Stick shrugged.

“You’re broken up,” Rex said. “I’m sorry, old buddy. I guess I messed up.”

Stick shrugged again.

Rex squeezed Stick’s shoulder. “Things will look up. You’ll see.” He clapped Stick on the back. “Where ya going?”

I’m on my way out for food, Stick tried to say, but his voice caught in a knot of phlegm in his throat. He rumbled it out and tried again. “Food,” he rasped.

Rex cocked his head at Stick. “When was the last time you spoke?”

Stick shook his head.

“Since we were arrested?” Rex pursed his lips and it made his mustache ripple like a hairy inchworm. “Right,” he exclaimed and slapped his palms together. “Consider this the first day of me making everything up to you.”

He walked past the bar, circled to the kitchen, and got out the pair of rubber dishwashing gloves that Stick kept below the sink. He pulled an apron over his head and started clanking silverware and bowls, plates and saucers. He dragged Stick’s kitchen table over and covered it with a patchwork of dishtowels. He filled a lasagna pan with soapy water and piled in the forks and knives and spoons, the spatulas holding imprints of Stick’s huge lips. Stick towered behind him, feeling guilty and useless until Rex pulled a six-pack of Miller from his bag and sat Stick at

the bar with the cold bottle in his hand. Rex opened one for himself, and the pinch of escaping carbonation sounded like spring. Rex sipped his bottle and when he set it down on the little bar of counter behind the faucet, his yellow glove left a skirt of white bubbles around its middle. He set to scrubbing and sponging and rinsing. The mad towers on Stick's countertop dwindled; Rex assembled an orderly and sparkling alternate city on the plains of the dishtowels and Stick began to understand that maybe the world hadn't quite ended.

When Rex had finished the dishes, he filled the sink with water and carefully measured out two caps of bleach as the sink filled. Then he spent minutes pursuing Ralph across the carpet and beneath the furniture, his hands of yellow rubber spread before him like someone about to receive a hiked football. He finally cornered Ralph and caught him between his palms as the spider attempted to scurry up the wall. Rex jogged to the terrarium and dropped Ralph inside and picked up the mass of black tape, blue paper, arthropod carapaces, and a trailing snake carcass and dropped it in the garbage.

He peeled the rubber gloves from his hands, laid them on the bar to dry, and said, "C'mon Sticky, I'm taking you to the grocery store."

When they returned and Rex had fired up two juicy, dribbling steaks, baked two potatoes, and microwaved some bread rolls and slathered them with butter and he had Stick sitting at the bar eating and sipping a third beer, only then did he casually bring up, as if it were idle conversation, the blood heist.

Stick slept well that night, satiated by meat and company. But his dreams were of Cry.

Chapter 13

Alma and the Tandem Bike Pilgrimage

Stick thought of those months spent with Cry as the sun rose above the mountains. His time with her was like the shattered spokes of the wagon wheel sloughing into the grasses near the tree where Stick was chained. He could tell it'd been lying there for years, its broken form cupped together by fingers of bristling brown grass. It was half sunken into the earth, some of the spokes all but submerged, others splintered. Just like the parts of his life. Broken, as if every person he'd known had gathered around the wheel that was Stick and twisted at cross-purposes until his whole being had split. The wheel, bleached pale by the sun, its underside chewed by larva, ants, termites—its parts would never fit back together. Stick was staring at a dead thing.

He leaned his head back against the tree and let the day dawn. First there was wind, indigo, then the crescent of red like the eye of a malevolent giant peeping over the mountains, bent on exposing the land to another day of his blasting stare. One day the sun would burn down the entire world. But today it would just burn Stick, tied to a living stake for sacrifice, waterless, blood-sucked, and weak. With no choice but to face East and stare into the sun as it drained his life.

The upper curve of that eye crested the mountains and cast a flood of gold across the plains. Far away, a dozen miles maybe, it gathered on objects out in the desert, too small to discern save for the minute starbursts of light that set them twinkling. It was a small caravan of pinwheels spinning light instead of wind, and they were moving toward him across the land.

An hour passed before he could pick out any details. It was a team of a half dozen tandem bikers, their streamlined helmets pinched forward like the carapaces of the rhinoceros beetle, their legs twirling in smooth circles, the bikes seeming to float across the terrain. They were perhaps the most elegant beings he'd ever seen, each powered by the labor of twinned legs moving at near perfect pace.

An hour later they pulled up into the yard. They all wore the green and red of the Mexican flag on their biker helmets. Their dark skin looked like it belonged to this landscape bristling with rugged brown life. They wore spandex shorts and shiny shirts with thousands of little holes to let the moistures of their bodies breath out into the air. Their bikes bulged behind the seats and at the handlebars with saddlebags, and each had a water bottle fastened to the bar between the biker's knees.

The bikers stood their mounts at slants as they examined the giant Stick, his shirt and pants armored plates of blood. His mouth and the stipple of his upper lip was stained in a burgundy delta, his hair caked and itching. He cleared his throat and licked his lips, trying to build up enough spittle to speak.

A young woman dismounted from the lead bike and approached him. She was small, with stocky thighs and square shoulders. She held a water bottle and approached him as if he were a bear. Stick imagined he must look like a monster, left by the Gods to suffer in chains for an act of betrayal. When she got close enough to hold the bottle up to his lips he saw that she had very large, dark eyes and that her black hair was gathered up into an apple-sized bun behind her helmet. Stick let her squirt a few blasts of warm liquid into his mouth and swallowed.

She spoke to him in Spanish and he caught enough to understand that she was asking him what he was doing out in the desert.

“*Es una historia muy increíble,*” he said, wondering if the words were right. He’d picked up a little from his father, from the Spanish-spoken zookeepers.

“You speak English?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Are you hurt?” she asked. Her accent was very good.

“No,” Stick said.

“Is that your blood?” she asked.

“Not much of it,” he said, and licked at the metallic blood dried into the stubble above his lip. “Bloody nose, that’s about it.”

The man on the back of her tandem bike shouted a tumble of sentences at her with the word *peligroso* in them. He was young and handsome.

“My boyfriend thinks you may be dangerous,” she said as she squirted another burst of water into Stick’s mouth. It was the best thing he’d ever tasted. “Are you dangerous?”

Stick shook his head as the liquid trickled down his esophagus into his belly, like a cool hand spreading its fingers. It was marvelous. “Harmless,” he said and imagined himself as a tarantula, huge and frightening and defenseless.

“My boyfriend is paranoid,” she said. “He has no sense of adventure at all. It’s very irritating.” Behind her a few of the bikers laughed. “He also doesn’t speak English.” She smiled impishly at Stick. “So, how did you come to be wearing clothes soaked in someone else’s blood,

Mr. Harmless Giant?” She had her head cocked playfully up at him, and Stick thought she must be a very brave person.

Stick sighed and his body slumped a little against the rough bark of the cottonwood. “I betrayed someone,” he said.

“Who did you betray?” she asked.

“A cripple,” he said. “A crippled woman.”

“Did you love her?” she asked. The question sounded beautiful, the way her accent stretched the *i* into an *ee* sound and rounded the *o* into something that seemed to fill her whole mouth before it emerged as sound. Stick felt a great weight in the back of his throat at the question and had to swallow and look at the ground between his blood-muddied shoes.

‘ She waited for him to look back into her sharp little eyes. “You did love her.”

Stick nodded.

“You betrayed the woman you loved. Is that her blood? Did you kill her?” she asked.

Stick tightened his lips and shook his head.

The woman surveyed the carnage. “So much blood,” she murmured. “If this was hers, then your woman would be dead.” Her eyes traveled across the plastic bags splayed in the dirt. Horseflies buzzed around her and she waved her hand at one as she eyed the ice cream truck, sitting stranded like a beached cetacean. He could tell by the crook of her brown eyebrows and the knit of her jaw that she was of a very logical mind. She looked at Stick and said, “There is much more to your situation than meets the eyes.”

It was true.

“My boyfriend,” the Mexican biker rider said, “has a pair of lock-cutters in his pack.” He tossed her head behind her, where her boyfriend still straddled their bike. “Should he cut you free?”

Stick nodded. “Yes, please,” he said.

“Of course you think so,” the woman said. “Every criminal thinks they should be free.”

I'm not a criminal, Stick was on the verge of saying. But it was not true. He was one, and he didn't want to lie to such a friendly, open woman.

“Ah-ha!” the woman said. “You just admitted that you are a criminal. I caught you.”

“I have done bad things,” Stick said. “But I'm trying to atone.”

“It is funny you should say that.” The woman's eyes widened and she seemed delighted.

“We, too, are on a quest of atonement, only to the north. We're going to bicycle all the way to the Arctic Circle to see the glaciers before they melt.”

“That's far,” Stick said.

“We're engineers,” she said, as if that explained things. “I worked for a company that has done awful things to the Mexican people, and to the environment. We've all become rich by producing things that kill the earth. All in the name of money. So now we're going on a pilgrimage to ask forgiveness. We hope to rent a yacht and see polar bears before they're all extinct. And the aurora borealis, when the sky weeps light into the ocean.”

It sounded like lunacy to Stick, but he nodded politely.

“Now that I've told you my story, you should probably tell me yours, so we know you're not dangerous. Start with your lover.”

The handsome man on the back of her bike removed a pair of bolt cutters from his satchel and moved cautiously forward. The other bikers were dismounting, leaning their bikes to rest on kickstands, yawning and squirting bursts of water into their mouths.

“I’m not much of a storyteller,” Stick said. “I can never find the words.”

“Words are not what I’m after,” she said. “I’m after this,” and she poked Stick in the breastbone. “Your heart. That can only be found through stories.”

“I don’t know my story.”

She smiled. “Can you sum it up?”

Stick swept his blood-stained body with his eyes. “This isn’t the woman’s blood,” he said.

“It comes from the bags,” the woman guessed. Stick nodded. “Someone tied you here, soaked you in blood, and left you to die.” Stick nodded. He didn’t tell her about the bats, the mosquitoes, the assassin bugs, and the demon-like baying of the lone dog in the distance. “What kind of an animal would do such a thing?”

“My best friend,” Stick said. “He took my girlfriend’s blood and went south.”

“In a bag like this?” she asked, lifting one of the limp bags from the ground with the toe of her biker shoes.

Stick nodded.

“South toward Mexico?”

Stick nodded.

“*Hijo de puta,*” she said and turned to translate what Stick had said into a tumble of Spanish. Most of the words he could catch were curses. She turned back to him. “How did you come to have bags of your girlfriend’s blood?” she asked.

“We’re thieves,” Stick said. “We robbed a blood bank. Hers just happened to be there.”

“A *blood bank*?” she said. “Is that like a center for blood donation?”

Stick nodded.

“That is sick,” she said.

Stick nodded, searching for words to justify his actions. “I was stuck in a very dark place,” he said, meaning his apartment.

Stick sat in his apartment. Every few days Rex visited, sometimes with Flowers. Other than that Stick spoke to no one. He went out to pick up the unemployment checks. He walked to the store and came back with cans, potatoes, loaves of bread, cases of beer that he cracked open and sipped in the darkness. He watched Ralph. Ralph hiding himself in the hem of the curtains. Ralph stalking and pouncing on the shadow of a leaf cast through the window above the door. Ralph biting the shadow and looking baffled that he couldn’t eat it. Ralph walking up Stick’s outstretched leg, over his groin and stomach to perch on his chest, moving up and down on the swell of Stick’s breathing. Ralph nestling in the crook of his neck and shoulder to sleep.

A tarantula could sleep for a week with a full meal in its belly. An anaconda could sleep for months. Stick wished he were such an organism. To close his eyes and find a month cut from his life. What a gift.

She came to see him. He'd buried his phone. Maybe she'd tried to call him. She may have called over and over again. She may have gone to the zoo to look for him, finding a smoking crater where his life had been. She may have tracked down Jane, the supervisor of the entire reptile, amphibian, and invertebrate collection, and asked about Stick's whereabouts. Jane may have taken several tries to start her sentence—she had a stutter that caused her to trip over the beginning of Stick's name like a root—telling Cry that Stick was no longer with the zoo. That by law she couldn't give out any more information than that.

In any case, she showed up at his house. It took her a month. He was lying on the couch when the wheel of her chair threw a spike of reflected light through his window. It pierced the haze of his curtains and the screen of trees and shrubs in his garden and he knew that it could only be her wheeling up to the top of his stairs. He crept into the bedroom and shut the door until it was barely cracked so he could peer across the living room and through the window in the front door.

She stepped down the concrete steps silently, one at a time, lowering one foot onto a stair and then the other to that same stair. She was wearing brown boy's corduroys, very old tennis shoes, and a pink blouse that hung loose on her body. Her hair looked freshly slept upon. She had crutches, the kind with loops for the arms and firm handles for the fists, and she moved across his patio in a stoop. She looked older, sicklier walking than in her chair. Opening his door was a balancing act. She braced it with a shoulder as she knocked on his inner door. She knocked again. Her body shifted and the screen door gave a little creak. She stood there, thinking maybe, or listening. He thought she might leave.

Then her slivered voice came through the apartment. “Stick,” she said and it was a breakable, sad word. The name of something dry and dead. “Stick,” she rasped. “Stick!”

Maybe it was because she had switched back to using his last name, instead of calling him John. Maybe it was because she was obviously healing and now she could walk even further than before. Maybe it was because he didn’t want hope. He was finished with hope and optimism. He’d tried to be a normal, happy person for long enough.

It was all of those reasons. But the real thing that held him was fear. He was afraid of her pitying look, the way she might view him as if he were no longer someone to be loved, but someone to be helped. He’d been that person his whole life, the outcast, who people either avoided, pitied, or feared. Rex, Cry, and Flowers, in his artless way, had been the only people to treat him as a real person. He couldn’t bear the possibility that she’d become one of those who saw him as a charity case.

He closed the door and sat in the darkness of his inner room until he was sure she’d left.

The Mexican woman pursed her lips and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I certainly understand getting stuck in a dark place. This whole world seems very dark at times. Sometimes a good person can do very bad things in such a place.”

Stick nodded, realizing he’d been misunderstood for the better.

“But what will your friend do with the blood in Mexico?” she asked.

“Sell it,” Stick said.

“That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard,” she said. “You Americans always think Mexico is some huge, perverted *mercado*, where you can sell anything and make yourselves into millionaires.”

Stick hadn't thought about it that way. “We got a tip from a clown. He said he knew a guy who could sell it to gangs on the black market.”

“*Se recibió un tip de un payaso?*” The woman laughed. “Well, Mr. Harmless Giant, are you sorry you stole other people's blood and belittled my country by thinking we would provide a market for such a sick plan?”

Stick nodded.

“And am I correct to think that you are going to chase down your best friend and stop him?”

Stick nodded.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“John Stick,” he said.

She cocked her head. “Stick, like this?” and she pointed to a branch of the tree.

Stick nodded.

She had a curious air to her that reminded Stick of a small woodland mammal. “And what is your friend's name?”

“Spartacus Rex.”

“Spartacus,” she mused. “I'd bet on a Spartacus over a Stick any day,” she said. She motioned for her boyfriend to cut Stick loose, and though he frowned at her, he went around the tree and Stick's chains jostled as the man worked at them. There was a snap and Stick's arms

came free, dropping to his sides, paralyzed with numbness, with a half dozen concentric halos gnawed into the flesh of his swollen right wrist. The cuffs still hung from his left, and the man rounded the tree, clasped them in the beak of his cutters, and snapped them free.

“You look terrible,” the woman said. “Enrique! *El yodo!*”

The man held up a fanny-pack with a big red cross on it. “*Ya lo tengo,*” he said, his voice tight with annoyance. He set the cutters in the dirt at Stick’s feet, unzipped the pack and wet a little square of cotton with iodine. The square was no bigger than Stick’s thumbnail. The man ran his gaze up and down the length of Stick’s bloodied body and said, “*Ay cabrón,*” probably in dismay at the scope of the task ahead of him. He tiptoed and dabbed at Stick’s upper lip, probably thinking to clean him from the top down. The man’s upturned face, as he lost himself in cleaning, melted into a handsome half-smile, and the huff of his breath on Stick’s neck was warm and comforting and smelled like peach.

The woman stood a few paces back, hands on hips, nodding in approval at her boyfriend’s work. The other bikers gathered closer, making graceful swishing noises in their spandex garb as they burst water at themselves, stretched their quads, or patted each other on their round and gleaming buttocks. They were obviously all couples, each couple powering a tandem bike.

As Enrique dabbed at Stick’s collar bone, Stick wanted to tell him that what he really needed was just water and a big cloth, except for on the arms, but the man’s attention felt too good, and the cold sting of the disinfectant felt like therapy. Stick looked at the woman and asked, “*Como se llama?*”

“Alma,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

The bikers decided, after a great deal of discussion, to halt for a day of rest. They spent the day kicking a soccer ball around, going on hikes and returning laden with firewood, and performing maintenance on their bicycles. Stick sat and told his story to Alma and a few other English speakers, many of whom had attended college in the States. When evening came, Stick dragged the pallet from the house and placed it on a huge slab of rock, like the back of a cetacean caught and frozen beneath the soil thousands of years ago when the desert was a sea. The stone would hold warmth for hours after the sun set and the desert temperature dropped. This land had two seasons, winter and summer, one that came at night, the other that ruled over the day. Neither was gentle.

The band of engineer tandem bikers lit a fire that was bright and puffed jolly clouds of smoke into the dusk. They produced veggie burgers from collapsible Tupperware containers and seared them over an ingenious grill that folded into a single pole like a baby gate. They sang what Stick assumed were Mexican pop songs, which one of them accompanied on a mandolin. Every item they carried was tiny, plastic, collapsible, and weightless. They kept waving Stick over with grand welcoming gestures of their arms, but he just forced his mouth into a smile and held up his palms and stayed on his rock, looking up at the constellations.

Long after the bikers had zipped themselves into their extra light-weight synthetic sleeping bags, space-age silver, good to thirty-below, Stick still lay awake. He smelled her, sensed the vibration of heat and motion in the air as Alma crept up on him like a lynx, silent and grinning, but he still jumped when he felt her slip under the banner from the ice cream truck that he was using as a blanket. She cuddled up to him, put a sweaty hand on his chest.

“I’m already packed,” she said. “I’ve taken extra food and water for you—I guess one could say that I have stolen it.” She giggled. “I’ve never stolen anything before!”

“Your boyfriend,” Stick said, worrying about how he must smell.

“My boyfriend sleeps like a child. He won’t wake up until dawn and then you and I will already have stolen his bicycle.” She giggled again and drew away to give him a stern look.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m still in love with my boyfriend. I’m coming with you only as your new friend.”

Stick awkwardly patted her on the back, his hand sliding on her skintight, aerodynamic shirt. “You don’t have to do that. I can walk. I am a good walker.”

She sat up, still keeping her legs beneath the banner for warmth, cocking her head down at his face. “It is my fate to help you get your lover’s blood back. I can feel it. We’ll ride after your friends and force them to give us the blood and then you can send for your woman and we’ll all three go to Mexico City together. It’s the most beautiful city in the world. People care about each other there. My family will help you to get the job of your dreams and your crippled woman the care she needs. Our doctors are the best in the world—and they work for cheap. What work do you do?”

Stick let out a sigh. “With animals.”

“You are a veterinarian?”

“No, I care for animals. I used to. I was a zookeeper.” It sounded so pathetic for him to say it, the way his voice trembled over a job title that was nothing compared to doctor, lawyer, engineer. “It’s all I ever wanted to do,” he said.

“Mexico City has the most wondrous zoo,” she said.

Stick remembered the animals throwing themselves against the glass of their terrariums, their skin boiling and blistering in the heat radiated by the tint of their glass prisons, the death shrieks they emitted as if they already had a glimpse of the next world and what they perceived there was a nightmare. George Burns cooked alive in his shell. The limp, quiet bodies of the two skinks in his pockets.

“I don’t think I can do that work again,” Stick said.

“We’ll get you any work you like,” she said. “My family has connections. Let’s go.”

“It’s crazy. I’m not letting you leave your friends. How will you ever find them again?”

Alma tapped the flesh of her upper arm. “We are all microchipped. I have an application in my iPhone that can track Enrique anywhere he goes.”

Stick’s mouth hung open.

“So you see,” Alma said, “finding my friends again will be no problem at all. Also, I’m the best biker in the group. I’ll catch up to these slow-pokes easily.”

“You have a microchip?” Stick said. “That’s terrible.”

“What is so terrible about it?”

“Well,” Stick stammered after an answer. “Then people can find you no matter where you go.”

Alma furrowed her brow. “That’s the point.”

“But the government can find you. Doesn’t that scare you?”

Alma smiled and shook her head. “The government does not have my frequency. Only my friends and family do.”

Stick grasped at his forehead with his long fingers and tried to articulate to Alma what was so troubling about this concept.

Alma cocked her head down at him. "In America you microchip your pets, no?"

"Well, yes," Stick admitted. "But they're just animals."

Adana smiled. "Are animals more important to keep track of than people in your country?"

Stick had to admit she had him there. "Alright," he said. "So you're all microchipped. You should still stay with your friends."

"Mr. Stick," she said, "I am going to give you a speech. I want you to listen to it. Will you do that?"

Stick nodded.

"I'm a good person, just like you," she began. "I love my family and they love me, too. I treat all of my cousins and aunties and uncles with respect and they respect me, too. I'm very sweet to my grandmother. I honor my father and my mother. I never cheat on my boyfriend. I've worked very hard all my life. I was an excellent student, and I listened to my teachers and bosses and did my very best at my job.

"But just like you, I have also done terrible things. After college I got a job for Cargill, a company that distributes corn. Do you know it?" Stick shook his head. "They're one of the biggest grain distribution companies in the world. After NAFTA," she continued, "Cargill could import to Mexico with very low tariffs, and because of the subsidies of the United States on corn production, they could sell corn at a much lower price than Mexican farmers could.

“Mexico is a big country. So they hired business experts, managers, and engineers to make their operation more efficient in order to take advantage of NAFTA. I was a cyberspace engineer, straight out of Cal Tech when they hired me. They paid me a huge wage—truly huge. My job was to design a virtual infrastructure system to handle the huge amounts of information the new investment in Mexico required. Money spent, money earned, conversion rates at the exact moment of transactions, tracking, shipping, receiving. Figures showing ripeness and predicting rot. It was unfathomable, all this information, and it required a huge cybernetic system to handle correctly. It had to be instantaneous, global, and infallible.”

Now that Alma was talking about something she was expert in, her English was complex and articulate, and Stick found himself, once again, baffled that such a person would want anything to do with him.

“I very quickly became the head of my own group. We did a very good job, and now Cargill’s cyberspace infrastructure is one of the best in the agriculture business. This made them very efficient, and soon they were selling corn in Mexico at prices so low the Mexican farms that had been there for many many years could never match. People stopped farming because there was no point. And that,” she said, poking Stick in the chest, “is why so many Mexican farmers are now sneaking across your borders to work the orchards and farms in America. NAFTA and companies like Cargill put them out of business and farming is the only business they know. And I helped Cargill do that.”

“That’s very sad,” Stick said.

“Yes, it is very sad,” Alma seconded. “But it gets worse. The immigrants that come to America have no choice. It’s starve or work. And because they’re illegals, many children work in

the fields. They get no education. They develop arthritis in their teens. There are tuberculosis outbreaks because the illegals have no medical care. And they harvest some of the crops that put them out of business in the first place!”

“That’s not your fault, though,” Stick said. “You were just doing your job.”

“Yes. It was an exciting, challenging job. But once I found out how bad my company was to Mexico, I had to quit. And that is why I am on this journey. It is a pilgrimage to ask for forgiveness.”

“Well then,” Stick said, “all the more reason for you to stick with it and not get distracted by other people’s problems.”

“Wrong. Solving someone else’s problems is exactly the way to earn forgiveness. That is the way the world works. If you do something bad, helping a stranger is one of the best ways to achieve absolution. And it makes you feel very good!”

“Yes,” Stick said, thinking of the joy caring for Cry had brought him.

“So Mr. Stick, now that you know I have also been a bad person, just like you have, will you let me help you redeem yourself?”

“I guess so,” Stick said. He did like Alma. “But it won’t be easy.” Rex and Flowers had a day’s head start. They were heavily armed. And though Stick was a seasoned tracker, he wasn’t sure he could identify the spoor of an ostrich in a line-up, nor was he confident that the tracks of the animals would preserve very well in the windy desert plains that predominated the southern landscape. “I’m just not sure we’ll be able to catch them,” he sighed.

“We will!” Alma said. “All we need to do is have a positive attitude. That is one thing that I can teach you, Mr. Stick. To think positively.”

“Okay,” Stick said. “We’ll try.”

“Let’s go!” Alma whispered. “Before anyone else knows what’s going on.”

They rose from the ground, slipping from the canvas banner with *Here Comes the Candy Man!* printed on it. The bike stood several paces off, gaunt body glowing white with bulging pouches of supplies, like a camel born from a factory. They crossed the crunching desert grasses and pebbles, Stick crouching low, as if it would make his long feet tread more quietly. Alma mounted the front saddle and Stick stepped over the back, his groin a full foot above the seat. He settled in, and as they tilted the bike upright and snapped the kickstands back, Stick caught a glimpse of the tree trunk, its bark stained dark in lines of blood like a stake in ancient times where animals were tied for sacrifice.

Then they were off across the desert, ivory with moonlight. They pedaled around the shack and into the vast emptiness beyond. They followed the holes punched into the dirt by the feet of the ostriches, the deep ruts of the cart wheels. The soil in this part of the desert was dry and crusty, and the trail broken across the terrain was easily visible, even by moon. Gauging by the general direction their tracks led, Rex and Flowers were winding northeast around the tip of the Sacramento mountain range that ran like a fin of rock almost all the way to Mexico. Alma and Stick followed the tracks for an hour or so until they’d rounded the mountains, where the tracks turned due south. The land beyond was a rolling desert flatlands. It would be hot there, with little water, and few far-flung towns. As long as Rex struck well west of Roswell, it was the perfect area to smuggle a herd of ostriches dragging a cart full of blood to Mexico.

Chapter 14

Mescaline Popsicles and the Chupacabras

The Albuquerque night was like a bone sawn open. The crumble of starlight cast the squat buildings along Montgomery Boulevard in yellowed pallor. The traffic halted and surged in a drunk man's march. Stick rode shotgun in Rex's truck, shoulders stooped and head dipped, knees crammed up against the glove box, arms folded over the dash. The glove box's latch mechanism had long since broken, and it flapped open whenever the pressure of Stick's knees lapsed. His arms gripped for dear life as Rex, drunk, wagged the truck across the lanes, ran stop signs and yellows as they blinked red. Flowers the Clown rumbled around in the bed of the truck behind them, giggling and cursing, among the various scrap there. All three of the men were red at the lips, their teeth edged pink when they grimaced at a near collision, their tongues bright crimson as if they'd been lapping up blood.

Really, it was from the popsicles that Flowers had insisted that they lick down to the bone-dry sticks before the wild ride had begun, as they stood beside the clown's ice cream truck filled with frozen treats and illicit stashes. Stick had been suspicious of treachery even in the first few licks—the popsicles were wrapped in wax paper with no brand name on the stick, obviously homemade—but now was sure there'd been something brewed into the sweet mixture. His head swam in surges of emotions without tenor, the world flexed in a fisheye of urgency, the light of street lamps pierced the windshield in dangerous spikes.

Rex drove as if on a flashback to some mission during his service in the first Gulf War, teeth set in a jagged grid through his snarl below the iron tangle of mustache. Rex and the clown

were taking Stick out for a raucous night on the town after coaxing him, with some effort, from his underground lair.

“How’s the job hunt?” Rex asked.

“I’m not hunting,” Stick said. He planned to linger on unemployment until it stopped coming and then get a job in a mine, in the bottom of a library, or in the darkest bowels of a warehouse or factory.

“Who needs a job?” Rex said, revving his engine at a red light. “Those sonnofabitches at the zoo never treated you all that well.”

“They were pretty nice,” Stick said.

“Still. Sonnofabitches, I say.” Rex hated all employers, authority figures of all types. “You should be happy. No more bosses. No more overtime. A free man, Stick, just like me and Flowers.”

The clown’s face peered through the window into the cab. “Free men!” he seconded.

Stick said nothing, clung to the dash as Rex made a wild left turn into a Walgreen’s parking lot, swung the truck in a big horseshoe, and turned left in front of screeching traffic back onto the same road in the same direction they’d been going.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Rex said. They knew each other too well. “That you’ve got nothing to live for now.”

“Untrue!” Flowers piped.

“Right,” Rex said. “You’ve got me and Flowers, and with friends, you don’t even need a job.”

Rex feinted a broadsides swipe at a station wagon packed with teenagers on the right with a jerk of his wheel, switched lanes in front of them when they hit the brakes. He made a right onto Juan Tabo going south, wheeling madly across all three lanes, jumping the median and blazing in front of a force of oncoming headlights onto a residential side street.

“What the hell was in those popsicles?” growled Stick, as his knees swung into the gear shift with the force of turn, and the glove compartment swung open like a broken jaw, spilling loose papers, a window scraper, and an old revolver with the action missing. Rex drove past the muted faces of houses that snapped to life in floods of motion-activated lights.

“Cherry!” Flowers hollered from where he’d toppled onto his back in the truck bed.

“Cherry and mescaline!”

“Goddamn you,” Stick growled as he smacked the compartment closed and pinned it with his knees.

“Face it,” Rex said, “you weren’t going to cheer up naturally. This is the same as any drug shrink would give you except Flowers’s cousin mixed it so you know it’s safe. And you hallucinate.”

“I don’t want to hallucinate,” Stick said. He wanted to be angry with Rex, wanted to tell him that he might someday be after a government job, but noticed that his knee was jawing the glove compartment open and closed in time to his speech like the wooden mouth of a ventriloquist dummy. He giggled.

“See? It’s working,” Rex said. “I haven’t heard you laugh in a year.” He flicked on the windshield wipers and sprayed blue-edged liquid across the glass in a great flat butterfly. Both

men laughed at the way the wipers swept it from existence and Flowers screamed as the liquid sprayed him in the eyes. Rex plowed over a mailbox.

Stick stuck his head back through the window to check on Flowers, but became distracted by the moon spinning above them like the nucleus of some mad mobile of stars that might have been street lamps, or houselights, or refracted pinpoints of light from the myriad luminance of the city, or could have been hallucinated altogether, but were most likely stars. It was beautiful and nauseating. Stick pulled his head back in and grasped it between both hands to keep the world from spinning.

As he drove slowly, carefully now, sobered by the murdered mailbox and the stillness of the residential blocks, Rex began again to hold forth.

“No more jobs!” Rex snapped. “No more bosses! We’ve got a proposition for you that’ll change your life forever.”

“Not the blood heist again,” Stick moaned.

“What else is there?” Rex said. “It’s the perfect plan.”

“It’s flawed,” Stick said.

“The plan’s brilliant,” Rex said.

Stick thought he might vomit. “I need out.”

“The plan is good, Stick. We’re gonna use that money.”

“Blood money,” Stick said and laughed.

“Ha-ha, yeah. we’re gonna use that money to fund a whole new life for ourselves. No more working for heartless bosses,” Rex said, tilting a thumb at Stick’s chest. “And no more dragging drunks out of fucking dive bars or carrying passed-out chicks out of concerts for me.

We're going to start our own business, be our own bosses. The American Dream." His eyes lit up golden in the glare of the street lamps.

"It'll never work," Stick said.

"It will work! It can't go wrong because no one has thought of it before. They'll never see us coming."

"Pull over," Stick said. "Let me out."

"No, buddy. We need you." Rex was blinking hard over the steering wheel, as if his eyes were having a tough time swallowing the road in front of him. "Blood is a business, just like anything, and we won't be robbing people. We'll be stealing from corporations. Plus, we have a plan all laid out. We've got a buyer, we've got a target to knock over—no security, full vault every Monday—we've got Flowers's ice cream truck to keep the loot cold. Low risk, big payoff. It's all set."

"Then you don't need me," Stick said. "Leave me out of it. And pull over. I'm gonna be sick." Rex had been using him for his size and strength since they were in first grade, tricking and coercing him into awful enterprises for thirty years. And Stick had stuck around because he had no one else, shunned by the world for his giantism, his freakish and towering stature, his jutting skeleton, his face like an effigy carved from wood. "I'm not your strongman."

"No. We don't need you because you're strong. We need you because you understand things!" Rex punched the wheel to accentuate his point.

Behind and above them Flowers screeched, "You understand things!" pounding his fists on top of the cab.

“You know how things work,” Rex slurred. “You know? Maybe not so much street smarts, or people smarts, but compared to the rest of us kids that grew up next to that lousy, muddy river, you’re practically a genius. You know?”

“You’re a genius!” echoed Flowers. “You know?” It sounded like he might be weeping.

“We need somebody who knows science,” Rex went on. “How cold to keep the blood. How to tell which blood to take. Which to leave. Me and Flowers can handle the guns, I can rig the truck. You’re the science man.”

“Count me out,” Stick said. “I’m not that desperate.” But inside he knew he was, and as the truck careened back onto a main thoroughfare, the world outside the truck too blurred and jagged by the mescaline popsicles to recognize, he thought to himself that life had finally flattened him, robbed him of every investment he’d ever made, and that he might as well steal blood with his nihilistic best friend and the sadistic clown.

Stick and Alma pedaled south. The trek was slow. Most likely, given the technology of the bicycle, Alma’s hulking thighs, Stick’s legs trained tireless from years of striding, they could have covered the entire length of the state in four days. However, the wind obscured the tracks of the giant birds they were tracking. And as they descended from the foot of the San Andreas Mountains, the dirt was baked so hard by the sun that it barely accepted tracks at all and Stick was forced to zigzag across the desert searching out trampled plants, loogies hawked by Flowers and baked into little green nodules atop the dirt, bird spore globs like raw eggs cracked open and cooked by the sun.

Sometimes they didn't pedal at all. Alma walked the tandem bike as Stick treaded before her, stooped and back-grasping. They covered maybe forty or fifty miles from the early morning of the night they departed through the following day. That night they bedded down past dusk, so tired that they barely spoke. Stick gathered armfuls of sticks from a half-mile radius of trees starved half to death by the land, while Alma erected her wind-resistant, cold-resistant, bug-resistant, rain-proof, snake-proof tent that weighed 3.7 pounds, poles included, and sprung from a long package thinner than Alma's arm. She roasted little spits of dried meat that came from a space-age silver package over the flame that Stick coaxed into life from a teepee of tinder. She produced a collapsible pot from a saddlebag, boiled carefully measured out water and placed into the fuming bubbles two wallet-like foil packets, which expanded like lungs slowly inflating. When she withdrew them and cut their seams open, Stick was surprised to find them blooming with fluffy cornmeal, spiced pork, and onions. The moon hovered over them like the eye's memory of a flashbulb, an imprint of the sun that lingered into the night.

They ate silently, exhausted, drank deeply from cups that expanded and collapsed like accordions. The meat tasted like a cross between teriyaki, kebab, and carne adovada. When Stick asked what animal it was made from Alma said, *ibextalope*, and Stick traveled back two thousand years, assembling meaning from Greek words used by scientists for ibex and antelope, and realized he was eating some new animal, genetically fabricated by man. This desert was so simple when Stick was a child, populated by snakes, coyotes, mule deer, spiders, scorpions, and birds of prey hovering star-high in pinpricks of black against the blue. This same land now tramped with ostriches, tandem bicycles, and *ibextalopes*, as if the animal kingdom, like the human one, had decided to globalize.

And that night bats added extra twinkle to the stars, as they swarmed high above in silent black clouds, invisible save for their eclipse of constellations. For fractions of seconds Orion lost his belt, Leo his noble mane. Gemini experienced the solitude that plagued Stick so often, Ares became defenseless, and the dipper transformed into a prank spoon. But the pants of the cosmos didn't fall, exposing the delicacy of this world, Leo's back stayed straight as a ramrod, the stars of Gemini didn't drip from the sky in despair, and Stick took comfort in the solidity of the cosmos.

Alma retreated to the tent early and Stick was relieved. He wasn't used to spending an entire day with someone else. The bats stayed high and far, flocking south. Stick remained outside, wrapped from shins to armpits in an ultra-light, ultra-warm, skin-thin blanket that Alma had procured for him, and draped in the big canvas banner. He watched the dribble of cosmos through the stratosphere, rock transmuted to quicksilver light. As sleep clung to Stick's eyelids like dew, he found himself getting up and walking over to the bicycle. He checked its tires, fingered each chain to assure that it rested squarely in gear, and patted each set of handlebars. When he spread his long body across the ground he thought of Cry's body, pale and, like the broad stripe of galaxy above, draining slowly of light.

When he slept, he dreamt of the terrible baying of a hound from hell pursuing him across the desert. He awoke several times, shaken from his slumber by some nightmare beast he couldn't remember when he sat up. But he was so exhausted by several nights of shoddy sleep, chained beneath the sink, chained to the tree, a half night chatting with Alma and the other half pedaling, that he fell back to sleep immediately, and those moments of waking, too, felt as if he'd dreamed them.

Stick awoke finally at dawn, as he usually did. He lay there, relishing the spread of the sun's warmth across his face. Alma stirred shortly after the sun had breached the mountains, and as she rustled about in her tent, Stick arose and rekindled the fire. When she emerged he had a pot of water heating and was making instant eggs and rehydrated soy chorizo.

"Good morning," he said.

She squatted down and glared into the smoky little fire and muttered something in Spanish. Her hair was like some crazy eagle's nest piled atop her head. Stick guessed she wasn't a morning person. The water began to boil and Stick poured it through a strainer filled with dark coffee into a cup he handed to Alma. She took it in both palms and put her face in the steam and groaned. Stick scrambled the eggs around in the pan and turned the chorizo.

"How did you sleep?" he asked once she'd taken her first sip of coffee.

"Not well," she said, her face still buried in the steam.

Stick sprinkled anonymous red powder from a plastic baggie he'd found among the food stores into the eggs, gave them a final stir and dished them onto two plates. He forked the chorizo alongside each mound of eggs and handed one to Alma. She took it and grumbled a begrudged *gracias*.

Stick downed his breakfast in what seemed like two swallows. His body gurgled in gratitude as he leaned back to sip down his own mug of rich black coffee. Above, the sky was an unflawed blue in every direction.

"How did you sleep?" Alma finally managed, after she'd downed half her meal and was on a second cup of coffee.

"A few nightmares."

“You didn’t hear that terrible animal that was howling and barking all night?”

Stick remembered dreams punctuated by howling, but even as he tried to grasp them firmly with his memory, they slipped further away. “I think I dreamt of a dog howling. They were probably coyotes,” Stick said. “There a lot of them around here. Did they giggle?”

Alma glared at him over sulking lips. “I told you, there was only one. And it didn’t giggle. It sounded like a monster. It barked and howled. It must have been a wolf.”

“There are no wolves left in New Mexico,” Stick said. They’d been hunted to extinction decades before, though wild varieties of the breed that had once lived in the state still roamed south of the border. But he guessed she’d heard the same animal he had when he’d been chained to the tree, that it had somehow followed them south, though that was very improbable.

“Well, it was no coyote. It sounded huge and cruel.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t sleep well,” Stick said. “If you want, I’d be happy to lead today so that you can take it easy.”

Alma’s mouth turned up in a little crescent. “Thank you, Stick. You are a very nice man.”

“You’re welcome,” Stick said, poking at the coals of the fire with a short, green-wooded branch.

“I appreciate your offer. But I am the leader on my own bicycle. That is the rule. I’m the best bike rider in *México* or America, and a bad night doesn’t change that.”

They cleaned up the campsite, packed, and were pedaling by eight o’clock. Ahead, the miles of desert shimmered with the mirage of water, but there was none. Waves of heat rose from the ground, undulating the world in a haze of pure, clear air. Stick wondered how long their few bottles, the gallon jug sloshing like a tireless and sloppy metronome behind his saddle would

last. There were plants you could eat. Stick knew how to extract drops of water from various fleshy cacti, but it took hours to produce enough to keep a person alive. They could make a side trek west to the mountains, which lifted so high from the desert floor they looked close, but in reality it would take a day to find a stream there and come back. Routes were circuitous here where the land could drop away into a hundred foot chasm or arch into a sheer cliff. To travel the high deserts one had to mimic the creatures that lived there, winding s-shaped like a sidewinder, taking flight on hawk-wings and letting currents lift you, or crouching low in the shadow of a rock and watching the world for days until something scurried by, convinced you were made of stone, and then snapping it up. Like a snare such a creature could wait, until one day some hapless prey strayed an inch too close. The creatures that had survived here the longest were built like traps: spare, starvation-proof, lethally patient.

They paused at the bottom of a hill so that Stick could find the trail again. Alma stood the bike and looked out over the stretch of endless desert, her face a mystery behind her dark glasses. As he searched, the top of a distant boulder reflected the sunlight, a patch of baldness on an otherwise dusty rock. Stick held his hand up to block out the sun and stared at that bright patch, then set out across the ground, stepping around cactus stands, taking long strides from rock to rock when possible to avoid disturbing the earth. He moved slowly, scanning for tracks, snapped stems of weeds, disturbances of twig, rock, and dust. He found nothing until he reached the boulder, which sat atop a small rise in the landscape, and which, when he circled around the back and climbed, was about as high as his waist. The imprint of an elbow and a torso had cleaned the dust from that patch he had spotted, which was why the sun reflected from it. In the dirt at the base of the rock he found a spent rifle cartridge. Someone had lain there, taken aim, and fired a

rifle. Moving in a sure line south, along the rise and down, were the prints of cowboy boots, half-moon heels, toes tapering into long, cruel points.

Stick rose and looked out across the landscape, angling himself according to the slant of that torso polished into the rock. Alma climbed up beside him as he stood there, peering. She had a pair of collapsible binoculars in her hands. She handed the binoculars to Stick.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

Stick held the glasses up to his eyes and tickled the focus wheel with his big thumb, teasing the distant brown blur into a relief of desert flora, particular with thorns, brittle stems, and angular rock. “A body,” he said.

“A body!” she said. “Who has died?”

Stick held up the bullet casing in his fingers and Alma stood quietly, wide-eyed, as he continued to scan the land. Finally, he found it, sad and deflated of life in a bare span of dirt. He handed the glasses to Alma and angled her face in the right direction with a gentle finger on each side of her Styrofoam helmet. She steered the glasses minutely until she drew in a breath and stopped moving.

“We’re not the only ones tracking them,” Stick said. And the face of a woman leapt up in his memory, cracked from a life of working in the sun. Her rugged boots and hair like tumbleweed brambles. The ostrich farmer, tough as any desert creature, from whom Flowers had stolen the birds, was stalking Rex and Flowers. He followed her boot heels back down behind the small rise in the land and found a horse waiting for her, its shoes easy to mark in the dirt. She was on horseback.

“Let’s go look at the body,” Stick said.

They found it crumpled in the dust, a mound of feathers trailing three leathern appendages. But it hadn't just been shot. The corpse was ravaged. The neck had been gnawed through by some wide and powerfully jawed animal. The chest was mauled and a swathe of dirt spread in a dark bib where the animal's blood had spilled, earth that was pushed into long tongue shapes by the licking of whatever beast had come and scavenged at the ostrich since it had been shot. Its heart lay in a pile several feet distant, chewed and sucked and spat, like a fist-sized wad of grey tobacco. The beasts footprints were broad with five clawed toes, bigger than those of a coyote or wolf.

Stick who'd been trekking over this land his whole life, who could see the gait and pace of a creature by squatting and measuring its stride with his eyes, who had even examined the tracks of dinosaurs left from distant Ages, was stumped. This predator was completely foreign to him. It was probably the same one that had been howling through the past nights, an animal he couldn't recognize by its call, bite marks, foot print, or thirst for blood. It was as if the three mens' crime had summoned a demon to track them down and exact justice.

"I know this animal," Alma said.

Stick shook his head. Flowers and Rex's trail continued south, the drag of the ostrich cart trailing wildly after the dancing steps of the bird that pulled it, another bird stolidly marching, its feet punching deep in the soil from what must have been Spartacus Rex. Two other birds ran lightly behind. Stick found the prints of Flowers's long, slapping clown shoes shuffling after. His steed must have been shot from beneath him. A few dozen yards on, the clown shoes disappeared; Flowers had mounted another bird. Combing the area around the corpse, Stick found another spent cartridge—evidence that Rex had returned fire on the rancher.

“I tell you,” Alma said, “I know the animal that did this.”

Stick looked at her. “What animal? A dingo, maybe? A wolverine or a hyena?” He threw up his hands.

She shook her head. “*El chupacabras*,” she said, and pursed her lips while she figured out a translation. “The sucker of goats.”

There was no such thing. That animal was like the Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. It was mythological.

She seemed to be able to see the doubt in his face. “Think about it. It sucks blood and leaves meat. It barks like a beast from hell. It lives out in the desert, far away from people. *El chupacabras*. It has to be.”

Stick shrugged. “Okay,” he said. “It’s the *chupacabras*. Let’s hope it only attacks dead bodies.”

In late morning, pedaling in a lazy sidewinder as Stick tracked the bird and cart tracks, they crested a small rise in the landscape, and a ranch lay on the desert below. They’d veered east, pedaling gently uphill for an hour. To the southwest rose the green ridge of the Sacramentos. The desert directly before them was bare, save for the land surrounding the ranch, sectioned off into quadrants with barbed fences, set a-twinkle by the sun. The few buildings of the ranch clustered near a county road that wended by on the east side of the compound. A pickup truck, a cattle truck, and a pair of four-wheelers lay within a section of fenced land nearest the desert.

“We could use water,” Stick said. Alma had paused at the ridge, the toe of one small foot on the ground to hold the bike upright.

“We have several liters,” she said.

“The desert’s big ahead,” Stick said. “Don’t know how much water we’ll find.”

The wind gusted from the Sierra Blanca to the east, fingers of cool grasping through the heat. Alma pushed her helmet back on her head and passed a forearm across her hairline. It came away glistening. “If we leave their path, will we find it again?” she asked.

Stick nodded, but she couldn’t see him where he was seated behind her. “Yes,” he said. “We’ll put a marker where we leave the trail.”

“Okay.” She set her helmet square, lifted her toe, and they coasted down the gentle slope into the low, hot desert.

They rode from the rough terrain onto a dusty road pitted with holes where rain had eroded the dirt. After half an hour of easy downhill, they entered an open gate into a fenced enclosure, roughly an acre in size. The truck they had observed from the ridge above was a hundred yards inside. The wind teased a flurry of little clumps of bronze fur tangled amidst the desert grass.

Beyond the truck, three men and a woman stood in a ring with their arms spread wide, trying to contain a frenzied animal with their outstretched arms. It was an alpaca, a quadruped about the height of a person, four-legged, with thick bronze fur, a long neck, and a tiny head with upright ears like a Doberman. It was in a panic, running in circles and bucking. Its wail sounded like a distraught child’s. Its coat was soaked with sweat and it was shedding big clumps of fur on the ground.

“Stay back, there!” a big rancher hollered. He was a Chicano man in jeans and a button-up, with a cell phone on one hip and a knife on the other, wearing a cowboy hat. The other two men held their hats in their hands and positioned them in front of the animal when it attempted to bolt from their ring. The woman had on overalls and turned a lariat slowly in one hand, biding her time. A white cowboy hat severed from its owner lay in the grass several yards from where the ranchers tried to trap the animal.

Something had spooked the alpaca. Stick had seen animals in this state only rarely during his time at the zoo; this was because such panic was only caused by predators, something zoo prey animals never experienced.

“I can help you,” Stick said, treading softly up on the flank of the big cowboy. The ranchers were closing in slowly, every step corralling the animal into a narrower patch of ground, the woman hunched and making lunges with her lariat, but never throwing it. Finally, the terrified animal burst past the big man with the overalls and a wiry man with a cigarette behind his ear and galloped toward Stick. He spread his arms to their full span, and made a cooing sound with his lips. He was careful not to stare the creature down, but to keep his gaze on its feet, so that he could anticipate its movement and not panic it with a predatory gaze. The animal skidded to a stop a few feet from him and turned in two full circles, as the ranchers quickly reformed their ring. With Stick’s huge arm span as a supplement, the ring was tighter. Stick continued to hold its attention with his gentle cooing, and the woman snuck up on its right flank and with one sure toss, roped it.

The alpaca was a female, her teats hanging low and heavy. She was nursing young. The ranchers loaded her into the cattle car towed behind the pickup truck as the big man approached Stick with an outstretched hand.

“You know your animals,” he said. “Thanks for the help.” He lifted his hat a little to wipe sweat from his brow.

Stick nodded. One of the other *vaqueros* had taken out a little handheld device and poked at its screen with a plastic stylus. The woman looped up her rope and slung it into the back of the truck. All of them wore grim expressions. The woman and two of the men had blood on the knees of their jeans; the gloves that protruded from the back pocket of the big cowboy were stained red.

He took in Alma’s two-seater bike, ran his gaze up Stick’s body to find his face floating high in the angled sunlight. There were questions in the twist of his mouth, those pinched eyes. “Messed up day,” he said. The alpaca bucked and cried within the metal cattle car. “You two are traveling through the desert without a car, you best take care,” he said. “A wild animal attacked our ranch last night.”

“Take any of your stock?” Stick asked.

The man wiped his arm across his forehead again and didn’t answer. His dark eyes followed the other cowboys as they gathered up ropes and gloves and hats strewn across the ground. “*Diós*,” he said under his breath. He looked up at Stick, his face furrowed with worry. “Where you folks headed?” he asked. “You seen anything strange out there?”

Stick didn’t know how to answer that question. “Yes,” he said.

“Like what?” the big man asked.

Stick drew in a deep breath and didn't know where to start. "What happened to your animal?" he asked instead.

"I don't think I can tell you," the big man said. "Indescribable."

Stick was about to say something, to tell the rancher that he didn't need to tell them, strangers, what had happened, but that Stick had certain knowledge of animals. That maybe he could help.

But the man interrupted his thoughts. "I'll have to show you," he said. He looked over at Alma, who was watching them with her brow furrowed below her tapered helmet. "Hope you've got a strong stomach, *hermana*," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Very strong."

The rancher walked them across the fenced enclosure to the barbed wire fence separating it from the next one over. He pointed to a trail of blood dried black in the morning heat, sprinkled between the gait of a four-toed quadruped, the fringes of each print fuzzy from compressed hair. Stick guessed it had been left by the female alpaca they had just caught. The rancher confirmed this as he stopped in front of a section of barbed fence. The top braid of steel and barbs like sharpened bow ties, ugly as shrapnel, was wound with bronze, blood-matted hair. Thicker liquid, clotted and pale, dotted the soil at the base of the fence. The farmer saw where Stick was looking and said, "Milk." His voice quivered. "She must have been scared like nothing ever scared anyone in their lives. Alpacas are tame animals. They don't bite, they don't kick. They don't run from people. For a nursing alpaca to jump high enough to get halfway over this fence, it had to be terrified like you and I will never know."

Alma muttered Spanish words that moved in a pattern that seemed to capture the moment more meaningfully than anything Stick could have uttered. She stooped to touch the bulbs of gooey milk with a dirty-nailed finger.

“What scared her so badly?” she asked in English.

The man shook his head. He led them to a gate a few yards north. The ground in the enclosure beyond was rougher, and patched with knee-high grass. A few paces in, Stick saw in a clearing in the brush a hundred feet or so distant, brown-furred bodies littering the ground. As they closed on the bodies, the rancher’s hands began to shake. Alma’s mouth drooped.

There were at least a dozen bodies. Little alpacas the size of goats, their eyes glassy and the natural tilt of their mouths like half-smiles. Several females, bloated with milk, and several males, bigger and with greater ruffs of fur on their snapped necks. Around the cluster of bodies were the tracks of a broad-footed, sharp-clawed animal, the same tracks around the corpse of the ostrich. Stick saw its attack and retreat, its circling of the clustered herd, saw terror in the shuffling of the hairy footed animals as the creature fenced them in, took one by the neck and dragged it into the grass. The horrific dark splotch in the dirt near each body, the matching cavity in a gaping hole in each chest. The hearts where they lay chewed and sucked dry, lumps of grey in the dirt.

“Must’ve been a pit bull. Big one.” The man’s face held the sorrow of someone mourning the slaughter of family.

“It was not a pit bull,” Alma told him, as Stick thought about his zoo creatures, about which one could have done this.

“Dog of some sort,” the man said. “No wolves around here anymore.”

Stick thought he'd speak up before Alma said anything incriminating. "We've heard the howl of a big dog out there in the desert. Been following us for a couple days."

"What kind of dog?" the man asked, looking back and forth from Alma to Stick.

"It's not a dog," Alma said.

"Big breed of mutt," Stick said at the same time.

The rancher cocked his head at Alma. "If it's not a dog, what is it?"

Her eyes got big like a child's. "It's a monster," she whispered. "It's the *chupacabras*. It drinks the blood of domestic animals."

"Goat-sucker," he said. "I've heard of that. Guy from Texas killed one and put a picture on the web."

Alma nodded. "People have seen it in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Texas, Miami—all over," she said. "It's part lizard, part wolf, and part jaguar."

"I heard it was part alien, too. But maybe that's because I live too close to Roswell." The rancher shook his head. "I don't know about any of that. But I'll tell you what. I'm going to have my boys out on four-wheelers with shotguns tracking it down, whatever it was. That cow will never be the same. She's seen every one of her herd killed and their hearts ripped out of their chests. She'll probably die of shock over the next few days. I'll need to send messages to the other ranchers, warn them."

"Are there many others around here?" Stick asked.

He shrugged. "The whole southern half of the state's sectioned off into grazing land. Ranches are spread out, since it takes so much of this desert to feed a single head of livestock. But there're a few cattle outfits nearby, an ostrich rancher up north."

That was the piece of information Stick had been fishing for. “Ostrich?” he asked.

“Yep. Ostrich, alpaca, llama—they’re the new cash livestock of New Mexico. The ostrich ranch I’m thinking of is run by Crazy Patti LeBeau. She’s the toughest lady I’ve ever met. This dog goes near her stock, she’ll be after it like death itself.”

Stick thought of the ostrich shot through the chest and left to rot in the desert. “It’s time for us to go,” Stick said to Alma.

“I agree,” she said.

“Let me at least feed you lunch for helping me catch that cow,” the rancher said.

“We could use some water,” Stick said. “That’ll do fine.”

“Also,” said Alma, “could I use your computer? I need to send an email.”

“Sure,” said the big cowboy. “You can use my iPhone or I can take you up to the bunkhouse.”

“Your iPhone is fine,” Alma said and smiled.

While she poked at the screen with her finger, Stick filled their water bottles and accepted an extra two gallon jug from the cowboy. Alma was smiling as they walked back to her bike together.

“What is there to smile about?” Stick asked.

“Didn’t I tell you? I always have a positive attitude.”

“What could possibly be positive about this morning? We just saw a massacre.”

Alma took Stick’s arm. “I know. It was the most terrible thing I have ever seen.”

Stick waited for her to say more, but she just strolled beside him, clutching his elbow.

“Well? Why smile?”

Alma shook her head and said nothing more.

Soon they were off, biking back toward where they'd left Rex's trail.

Chapter 15

Marika

Stick's life lay in obscure wreckage beyond the well of his apartment. Somewhere out there Cry wheeled around the city, living off welfare and free clinics. The incinerated bodies of his creatures were in a landfill. The remains of his Reptile House, where he'd built a home over twenty years had been bulldozed beneath the soil.

The temptation was to stay in the gloom, holding a cool bottle in his palm. Feeding Ralph. Thumbing through the tombs of animals of every size and stripe, from places he'd never visit. The savannas of Africa, where the largest animals in the world battled over water holes. Australia, where lizards and poisonous spiders ruled a continent of desert. The Galapagos Islands, where a Pinta Island Tortoise named Lonesome George lived. At ninety years old, he was the last living member of his species, doomed to the most profound solitude experienced by any living creature on earth.

Stick had lost track of the days. The old woman in the house above treaded the same pattern across his ceiling seven days a week. She even checked the mail on Sundays. The birds outside peppered the air with the same calls, altering only with the seasons. Only humans differentiated their lives day by day, a luxury the wild world couldn't enjoy. Every day in the animal kingdom followed the same pattern: eat, sleep, stand constant vigil for predators.

It may have been a Tuesday that Stick broke his vow to eschew the daylight world forever. It was a week after Rex and Flowers had convinced him to take part in their ludicrous scheme, an acquiescence that was as much an act of despair as anything. To Stick the notion of

robbing a blood bank and driving to Mexico was akin to putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger: it was against everything he believed in, it defied reason, it would never work. For a principled, pragmatic man, the plan represented a destruction of self, even as for Rex and Flowers it represented hope in the face of a lifetime of struggle.

But he couldn't get Cry's hunched shuffle to his door out of his mind. It had been weeks and she hadn't come back. But still, the act of traversing the city in her wheelchair, clambering down his stairway—these were acts of forgiveness. And maybe that look of pity she would bestow upon him would be endurable if she were with him again.

So he ventured forth. He washed himself thoroughly, brushed his teeth, combed his thinning hair. As he opened his dresser to pick an undershirt, he couldn't remember if he'd soaped his legs for sure. He thought and thought about it, and in the end was unable to distinguish whether the memories were from this shower or another shower. He got back under the lukewarm stream and washed his entire body again.

Finally he was dressed and walking. His legs were sore until after the third block, as his muscles warmed up after weeks of neglect. He kept walking, passing the blocks of student apartments and rented casitas south of the university campus, where kids languished with cans of beer on their front porches and watched him pass like packs of jackals eyeing prey too large for them to tackle. He walked along Central Avenue, dipping beneath the interstate in a tunnel lit with neon tubes and decorated with black and white pictures of Old West Albuquerque. He turned north into her neighborhood of houses with ramshackle siding and yards overgrown. As he took the steps up to her porch, he thought of the gum-chewing police officer's threat to bust his ass and instinctively checked both shoulders for idling patrol cars.

It took him what seemed like an eternity to build up the courage to knock. The house was so quiet that he didn't think anyone would answer. The few times he'd been there, the place was alive with television, the booming of stereo systems, laughter, and voices.

Stick knocked a second time just as he heard shuffling within. He didn't know if he was more afraid that she would answer or that one of her feminist roommates would see him and tell him to leave, tell him what a terrible person he was, and immediately call the police.

The door opened. A woman with tangled auburn hair and camouflage trousers stood there looking him up and down. She was barefoot and wearing a white men's sleeveless undershirt. She had thick hair on her arms the same color as on her head and a downy little mustache. Stick recognized her from his visits, but couldn't recall her name. "Jesus," she said to Stick.

"Hello," Stick said. "Is Cry home?"

"You're a helluva sight to wake up to." She mussed a hand through her hair. "Last person I expected to see."

"Sorry," Stick mumbled. "Is she here?"

"Cry's not home," the woman said. "She went on a road trip to Ojo Caliente. An artist lady's putting a bunch of us up. She has this old converted church she uses for retreats."

"Oh," Stick said. "I see."

"Tell her you stopped by?"

"No." Stick opened his mouth to say more and just stood there like that.

The woman sighed. She stepped onto the porch, shut the door behind her, and stood facing Stick. "Tell me why you're here," she said.

Stick closed his mouth and opened it and no words came out.

“You think you’re in love with her, right?”

Stick nodded. “I am,” he stuttered. “She’s the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

The woman nodded. “The only one you’ve been with, right?”

Stick felt himself turning red. He nodded.

She groaned and rolled her eyes. “First of all, you’re never really in love with the first person you’re with. You just think you are.” She poked him in the chest. “Trust me. You’re just like a girl. We get all starry-eyed about the guy we lose our virginity to. But he’s usually a jerk.”

“Are you saying Cry’s a jerk?”

“No.” She smiled. “Cry’s great. But that doesn’t mean she’s right for you. She may be, but who knows? I don’t know you at all. But I do know her. She was with you because you were safe. And she was using you to heal. You know, get over her fucked-up childhood.”

Stick nodded. “That’s fine. I don’t mind helping her heal. And it’s good to be safe.”

“That’s true. We all live in this house because we’re trying to heal—physically, emotionally, whatever. But in the end, she’s just going to relate you to what happened to her back then. She’s going to realize that one day and leave you anyway. So, it’s probably best if you just go home now and never come back. You two are doomed.”

“Everybody has a bad childhood,” Stick said, thinking of his mother’s death, the stares and chuckles behind his back. “It’s part of life.”

The woman cocked her head at him. “You don’t know, do you?” she said.

Stick felt a falling motion in his stomach. “Know what?”

She leaned her head back and groaned up at the ceiling of the porch. “Jesus, Cry. I can’t believe you never told him.” She tilted her head back down to look Stick in the eye. “You really don’t know why she left home back when she was fifteen?”

“Tell me,” Stick said.

“She was pregnant.”

Stick felt dizzy. He grabbed an upright to steady himself.

“You okay?” The woman reached out and put a palm on his abdomen.

Stick didn’t think he wanted to know any more, especially from a near stranger. “What’s your name?” he asked.

She smiled sadly up at him. “Marika,” she said.

“I met you before,” Stick said. Her palm was warm on his stomach. “Bad with names.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “There are a lot of us in there.” Her hand dropped away and he missed it. It had been weeks since he’d had any positive human touch.

“I guess you should tell me,” he said.

“Tell you what?” she asked.

“Who the father was.”

“Maybe you should come in for a beer.” Marika squinted up at the sky, looking for the sun. “It’s almost noon, isn’t it?”

“Just tell me.”

Marika examined Stick as if he were a tree that might fall on her. “It was her father.”

Stick walked down the stairs. He tripped into the street, Marika’s voice tagging after him.

The choking stench of the asphalt rose up in the midday heat. He staggered to the opposite

sidewalk, wandering blindly on, knowing he'd never come down this street again. It was too great, the pain in this world.

He wondered if Rex had known. There was no way to find out, for to ask Rex would be to admit he'd found Cry again. And then he'd have truly broken his promise to keep her secret. So he did nothing but wander the streets for the rest of the day, stumbling down strange avenues he'd never tread before, fingering signposts and bus stop benches with numb hands, imagining the horrors inflicted on Cry when she was still just a girl. Knowing this sort of abuse happened all the time. Not wanting to envision that gorilla upon her, but unable to stop from concocting scenes in his mind. When he finally made his way home that evening, he was dehydrated and starved, as if he'd spent the day lost in a desert. He gulped water and lay on his couch in the twilight, his hand across his eyes.

The next morning he awoke at dawn and realized that he was trapped. Rex, Cry, the secrets of that family had put him in a box as dark and inescapable as his apartment below the earth. He decided to linger there, in that darkness, and simply wait for the day of the blood heist, ruing his decision that morning to ever leave.

Chapter 16

The Internet Van

They returned to Rex's trail and followed it downhill between the White Mountains far to the east and the Salinas range to the west. As the bird flew, a direct route south would lead them not to Mexico, but to Texas. Stick shuddered to imagine what would happen to a pair of men on stolen livestock carting gallons of stolen blood into a small Texas town, where there was an ancient creed against rustling. But equally frightening was the prospect that Crazy Patti LeBeau, who was obviously a dead shot, would catch up to them first, or that whatever hound or mythical creature was howling beyond the bounds of their camp and sucking the blood from the hearts of alpaca would set upon them in the night. Stick, despite how clearly he'd come to realize that Rex was a terrible person, still couldn't bear to think about his friend in trouble.

LeBeau's horse tracks now co-mingled with those of the ostriches that Rex and Flowers rode. Frequently, her trail broke away from Rex's path, forging shortcuts that merged again with the two-toed trail of the birds later on. In this way, she was obviously trying to gain ground on them, though Stick couldn't tell if she'd been successful or not. Rex's path had become very easy to follow since the dirt in this part of the state was looser and finer, holding imprints more readily.

In the late afternoon, Stick and Alma came across a man standing a roan horse by the side of the track. He had long black hair, wore a cowboy hat. A turquoise bolo tie hung through his collar.

"You're trespassing," he said when Stick and Alma had pedaled up.

“Is this your land?” Stick asked.

“Partly,” he said. “This is Apache land.”

“I’m sorry,” Stick said. “We didn’t know.”

The man shrugged and smiled. “We’re used to trespassers. Guess you could say, we’ve had a few hundred years to get used to ‘em.” The man had a big lump of chewing tobacco under his lip that he shifted into his cheek to talk. “A few days ago I would have said that you were the strangest trespassers we’ve ever had,” he said. “But just after lunch yesterday, two white guys rode by on giant birds. Then a cowgirl with a rifle rode by around sunset.” He moved the lump back under his lip and sucked at it, then shifted it back into his cheek. “Suppose you’re chasing all of them.”

Yesterday afternoon. That meant that they were less than a day behind and could probably catch Crazy Patty by evening if they hurried. Stick nodded at the man.

“Thought so,” he said.

“Did you talk to them?” Stick asked.

The man nodded.

Stick was afraid to ask about the conversation he’d had with them, but Alma filled in for him. “They’re very bad men,” she said. “What did they say?”

“Said they were salesmen,” the man said and chuckled. “Going to Mexico to sell some merchandise. Just about the biggest lie I ever heard, but I figure that’s between them and Texas, since that’s where they’ll end up if they keep heading south. And between them and the lady with the rifle who was tailing them.”

“How far behind was she?” Stick asked.

The man shrugged. “Couple hours.”

“Anything else you can tell us?” Stick asked.

The man grinned. “I wrote ‘em a ticket for littering.” He opened his denim jacket to flash a badge. “Sheriff’s deputy,” he said. “Tribal police.” He flapped his jacket closed. “You’re gonna love what they littered.” Stick already dreaded what it would be before the man pointed to the plastic blood bag that lay on the ground nearby.

“That’s why we are chasing them,” Alma said.

“You police?”

Alma and Stick looked at each other.

“That was a joke,” the man said. “Normally, a couple guys ride through throwing bags of blood on the ground, or I catch someone hunting somebody else with a rifle, or a giant and a Mexican ride through on a bicycle built for two, I’d make a call to the state police. Cover my ass, let them handle it.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a pouch of Big League Chew and offered it down to Alma.

“Is that gum?” she asked, shaking her head at the pouch.

“Yep. Tobacco—that stuff will kill you.” He offered it to Stick, who took a big pinch of the pink strands and popped it into his mouth. As he chewed, saliva flooded into his dried mouth.

“Like I said,” the man continued, “normally I’d call the White police. But these two guys, they looked like hell. Faces covered with mosquito bites, worst I’ve ever seen. The fat one had a tick behind his ear the size of a grape. Cuts and bites on their necks like they had vampires for girlfriends. Weirdest part is, I had that,” he nodded his head toward the bag on the ground, “in

my saddlebag for a couple hours after I ran across them. Bugs were all over me. Tossed it away and watched it until the sun set. Came back this morning. Take a good close look at it.”

Stick dismounted and walked over to the bag. It was empty, crawling with flies, mosquitoes, a couple of assassin bugs the color of sand, and the radius of ground around it swarmed with smaller insects and tiny worms.

“Last night,” the man said, “on the ride home, I heard a demon howling off in the distance. These people you’re after, they’ve really pissed off the spirit world.”

“That’s why we’re after them,” Alma said.

“Is it normal around here,” Stick asked, still examining the twitching layer of creatures across the dirt, “for all these animals to be so close together?”

The man shook his head. “No. Ticks are so rare I’ve only seen one or two my whole life, and those were up in the forest.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the thin pine forests that patched the escarpments of the Salinas. “Last night my wife found two in my hair and one in my armpit. My people believe that the animals and insects do what the spirits tell them. Maybe the spirits are sicking them on your two friends.”

“I don’t really believe in spirits,” Stick said.

The man grinned. “Me neither. I’m Christian. But whether we believe in ‘em or not, they still seem pretty mad.”

The sun was setting. The sky darkened from blue to indigo and the shadow of the man atop his horse went from long and jagged to a dark blur as the daylight diffused. A wind rustled through the saltcedar weeds, nodding their maroon tops.

The man's horse tossed its head and pranced a few steps backward. "Ronald doesn't like to be out after dusk," the man said. "He's scared of the dark."

"Ronald is your horse?" Alma asked.

"Yep. Reagan was my favorite president."

Alma frowned at him. "I don't like Ronald Reagan. He waged too many wars in Latin America."

The man shrugged. "I never heard about that. I just know that he was a horseman. Like my dad and granddad. We're all horsemen in my family."

Stick interrupted to keep them from arguing. "Well, thank you, officer, for the information. We'll let you get on home."

"Name's Chuck," he said. "No need for formalities. I'm more of a wildlife officer than anything." He smiled mischievously. "I mainly go after coyotes that steal sheep. Drive drunk people home. Sometimes catch a poacher."

"I'm John Stick. And this is Alma..." He trailed off, having forgotten her last names.

Alma gave Chuck a tight smile. "Alma Analeticia Rodriguez de la Posta."

"You two got a place to sleep?"

Stick nodded, but Alma's face lit up. "Are you making us an offer?" she asked.

"I could put you up in our jail cell," he laughed. "Long as there's no drunks in there."

"You would put a delicate lady in a jail?" Alma said. "America really is barbaric!"

Chuck wheeled his horse to face east. "You'll find the Apache nation to be very hospitable. If you're really nice, I might even arrange a night for you in our casino hotel."

Stick didn't want to stay among strangers, but Chuck was already trotting his horse away, down a narrow dirt road puckered with hoof prints and rutted with the tire tracks of pickups and crisscrossed with the shallower, narrow-set tires of ATVs. Alma stood on her pedals as soon as Stick was back aboard and they peeled out in the dirt. The path aimed obliquely across the landscape toward a cleft in the mountain range heavy with gray-needled pines and firs. Stick guessed they would find a river there, and after half an hour of travel they came to the brink of a river gorge. It had steep sides and not a trickle of water at the bottom. A scattering of crows pecked in the dark silt of the riverbed, seeking the fish, amphibians, and invertebrates that cocooned themselves in the mud, awaiting water to emerge, hatch, or awake from hibernation. This ribbon of dark soil was the ghost of the current that flowed there during the wet seasons. It was much like the way the Rio Grande faded to a surface of mud and quicksand in the dry autumns.

“This river reminds me of where I used to play with Rex as a boy,” Stick said to Alma’s back.

She pedaled silently, trailing Chuck and Ronald along the gorge’s ridge. The sky was purple and a fan of red spread over the range looming above. “That’s the first time you’ve ever started a conversation with me,” Alma said over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Stick said, taking it as a rebuke.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “It is a good thing. Maybe you’re finally finding your voice.” She half turned in her saddle. “Hey, why would there be an empty bag back there?”

Stick had been wondering the same thing. “Maybe it punctured and they got rid of it.”

“Maybe,” Alma said. She turned forward, stood up on her pedals, and yelled at the horseman ahead of them. “Chuck! Is there internet where you’re taking us?”

Chuck turned his head and his profile chuckled at her. “You might say that.”

Chuck’s house was a neat blue one-story with a picket fence around a yard xeriscaped with planters of agave, juniper, lavender, and cacti. In the center was a portrait of an old Apache man made of brown, black, and turquoise gravel that formed a face, hair, and bandana. The portrait was twenty feet in circumference, the colors of gravel kept separate by curved plastic dividers. Stick imagined that from the air, the hard face staring up from below must have been striking.

“Who’s this?” Alma asked Chuck as she and Stick dismounted and lowered their kickstands.

Chuck swung down from Ronald’s back and patted his neck. “That’s Geronimo,” he said.

“Ah,” Alma said. “I see. He’s very beautiful.”

Chuck laughed. “Beautiful’s the last thing he’d want to be called. But I’ll take it as a compliment. I’ll just put Ronald in the barn. You go right on in. The Mrs. is probably cooking up something good.”

Alma marched up to the door in her helmet and sunglasses as Stick ran his fingers through his hair, smacked dust from his clothes, and worried how dirty his face had become over the past days. Never mind the blood-stained pants, the shirt tight as skin that he’d borrowed from the biggest biker. Alma rapped her knuckles on the door in her brazen way and by the time Stick

had joined her was introducing herself to a middle-aged woman with her hair in a single dark braid.

“I’m Gail,” the woman said.

“Alma,” Alma said. “Your husband is in the barn.”

Gail laughed. “I’m sure he is.” She turned to Stick. “We need to find you a new shirt.”

“Hello,” Stick said, feeling his face flush. “I’m John Stick.”

“Come in, John.”

Their living room was decorated with buck skins and several mounted deer and elk heads with an impressive number of points between them all. A desk stood beneath a window on the far side of the room with an open laptop on it. A couch and two lazy-boys made a half-circle around a flat screen television. The floor was sky blue and tan tile. The rich smell of stewing meat filled the place.

“Can I get you a drink?” Gail asked.

“Water please,” Alma said.

Gail looked at Stick, who nodded. She came back with two glasses and handed them over. “If you don’t mind,” she said, “I’ll just finish a little work I was in the middle of.”

“Sure,” Stick said.

“Of course,” Alma said.

Gail smiled and sat down at the desk, where she clacked the keys of her computer. Alma tilted the glass back, peering around the room over its rim. She looked like a curious child with the big glass between her hands.

Chuck came in from a door in the back. “What are you drinking?” he asked Stick. Before Stick could answer he said, “Did my wife give you that poison?”

Gail made a clucking sound with her tongue.

“Let me get you a beer,” Chuck said. He looked at Alma. “You want one, too?”

Alma shook her head over her water glass.

Soon the three of them were sitting around the living room chatting. Gail tossed in comments from where she sat typing and frowning at her screen.

“Excuse me,” Alma said. “But may I use the internet?”

Chuck smiled, as if at some private joke.

“Sure,” Gail said. “In about fifteen minutes.”

Alma frowned at her.

Gail and Chuck laughed.

“That’s when the van comes by,” Gail said.

Alma’s brow lowered even further. “A van brings you the internet?”

“That’s right,” Gail said.

Over dinner, after Alma had typed a message into Gail’s computer to the drone of the van’s engine idling in the street outside, Gail explained it.

“The reservation is spread out,” she said, as they ate elk stew, fry bread, charro beans.

“There are 460,00 acres of land in the Mescalero reservation and only 4,000 people. We live all over it. That’s the way it is throughout the whole state. You have to drive a mile to see a neighbor—in some reservations even more. Makes employment hard. Reservations have got the worst unemployment in the country—better since casinos, but still bad. Makes getting groceries hard,

gas, everything. Kids have to ride the bus an hour to and from school. It's the way our society has formed itself and there's no money or will to fix it. You live in a city or a town, you can find work. You live fifty miles from even a post office, and it's hard.

“So our tribe, we found a solution.”

“*You* found a solution,” Chuck said. He beamed at her over his stew.

She continued. “We opened a casino, like everybody these days. We've got a good ski resort. Those weren't my ideas. But that still leaves a lot of people strung out all over the land with nothing to do. So last year I came up with something.” She took a spoonful of stew and chewed it.

“I was riding the bus in Albuquerque. The Rapid Ride. It's a bus that makes fewer stops and takes you from one part of the city to another. The West Side to the University. The University to the Foothills.” She looked at Stick. “You must know it.” Stick nodded. “Well, it has the internet. The bus does. Business people and students sit on the bus with their laptops and browse the web, send emails, chat with each other.”

“At the same time I was riding the bus, I was reading a magazine. In it was an article about a woman who was making a living by posting advertisement links on Google. It was like God had told me how to help lower our unemployment. Now we've trained dozens of people to do it. They're authoring webpages, working with corporate sponsors. We have a van that drives a set route with a satellite hookup to the internet. We just type up all of our links during the day and when the van comes by, we upload them. It's a good amount of income.”

“Amazing!” Alma said.

Stick just smiled and shook his head. This world, he thought. How did I miss how interesting it has become?

Early the next morning after a breakfast of eggs and chili, Chuck walked Alma and Stick to their bicycle.

“I hope you catch your friends before they make it to Mexico,” Chuck said.

“Or Texas.” Stick checked the tires and made sure the straps were all tight.

“The way they’re headed, they should pass well to the east of El Paso and west of any real towns. Probably won’t run into more than a few head of cattle in Texas before they hit into the Rio Grande.”

“Right,” Stick said. “That’s good.”

Chuck nodded. “Oh,” he said, as if just remembering, “Alma. Why don’t you take my wife’s cell phone? It may get reception and you can call me if you need help.”

Alma’s face brightened up with a big smile. “Why, thank you Chuck. How thoughtful you are.”

“It’s my pleasure. Just thought it might come in handy.” There was something about their exchange that struck Stick as staged, as if they’d planned this conversation in advance. And when Stick and Alma set off back toward the trail, Alma stole a look back over her shoulder at the house. Stick turned as well and swore he caught Chuck and Alma sharing a confidential wink.

Chapter 17

The Blood Heist

Stick's apartment beneath the earth lay in darkness and silence in the pre-dawn hours the night before the blood heist. He sat on his big brown couch. He hadn't even bothered lying down that evening. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Stealing blood. It was inevitable. There was a momentum to the idea, as if the laws of human indecency would reach it no matter what resistance morality could throw before it. The longer Stick sat in his cavernous apartment watching his pet tarantula Ralph creeping along the baseboards and leaping from the windowsills, the more the idea of stealing blood aligned with the destiny of his species. It was remarkable that no one else had already thought it up, and eventually he became convinced that someone had, that he'd only be party to something already going on in some dismal, desperate part of the world that he'd never heard about. The telephone had been invented by two people at the same time, after all. Soon the world would be rife with blood bandits, and the future would be a bleak place, where people were merely vessels—of labor, of consumption, of precious biological resources to be harvested by the more bold or powerful.

Ralph stalked a cricket along the baseboards of Stick's living room, the seams of which he'd sealed with steel wool, spackle, and caulk, so that nothing larger than a termite could get in or out. He'd installed weatherstripping and door-sweeps on the interior and exterior doors, fitting them so tightly he could have filled the room with water and drowned himself, the leaks would be so minute. He'd turned the room into a coliseum for hapless gladiators to do battle with his

huge pet. He grew nothing in the garden but food for Ralph, having cultivated a small ecosystem over years of attention to plant life and soil quality and fungus and micro-organic diversity and a balanced food chain, the top of which he reserved for the tarantula by constructing bird scares and screening the soil for burrows of larger spiders. The result was a breeding ground for millipedes, earwigs, crickets, beetles, cockroaches, and little jumping spiders that provided Ralph with endless exercise and predatory satisfaction.

Stick had dumped three crickets into the center of the room as the sun set the preceding day. Though he'd been up nearly the entire night, suffering from insomnia since his life had fallen apart a few weeks before, exacerbated by the anticipation of the final arrival of the day of the heist, he hadn't seen Ralph take any of them yet. But now the spider was on the scent. He crept up behind the cricket, an arch-kneed step at a time, stalking with the primordial patience of a beast born to hunt. The wiry brown hairs of his thorax and legs stood out on high alert as the cricket crawled snuffling at some miserable miniscularity of filth crusted in Stick's shag carpet.

He hadn't vacuumed it in weeks. No point. Since his life had ended, he'd had nothing to do but wait, for days and weeks. During the day hours he sat on his brown couch. During the night he lay down on his brown couch. It was simple. Once or twice a day he opened a can of beans and dipped a tortilla into it or ate a carrot and some cheese and crackers and salami. He drank water from a flower vase, deriving pleasure from the way its graceful taper filled his huge palm. Normal water glasses disappeared into his hands, making him feel freakish even in the simple act of quenching thirst. Since his life had fallen apart he'd tried to alter the scale of everything in his home: he ate his meals with salad tossing utensils, drank soup from a ladle, plated his meals on platters, or just skipped the trappings of civilized eating altogether and ate

straight from the can, bag, frying pan. These days, he rarely cooked, finding that any activity that took him from his position on the couch caused him an anxiety that only lessened when he returned to sit and wait.

A diamondback rattlesnake could sit coiled beneath a rock for a month on high alert, waiting for prey. No food. No water. Just sun and darkness and the eternal silent stillness of the desert. When Stick had agreed to the blood heist, he'd had three weeks and three days to wait. He had honored them in the manner of the diamondback, patiently, tirelessly.

Ralph crept closer, angling out onto the plains of carpet, like the lion of a savannah of shag, keeping himself behind the cricket. A cricket's field of vision spanned nearly 300 degrees due to the placement of its eyes on the sides of its head. Such positioning was common in animals adapted to being prey: the cricket, the mule deer, the duckbill dinosaur, all prey that either presently or had once feared for their lives across the landscape of New Mexico. All his life Stick had considered himself such an animal: pursued rather than pursuing, controlled rather than controlling, reactive rather than proactive. Those days were over. They'd burned down in the fire at the zoo. They'd been obliterated by the secret he'd discovered about Cry, a harm he couldn't fathom any way to heal her from.

Rex had always been in charge of his life, a predator. He should have learned from Rex earlier, learned that life isn't about giving or caring, but about taking. Such were the laws of nature and commerce. Stick had been a witness to them his whole life, but had somehow been ignorant of their import to his own personal struggles.

This day marked the end of Stick's days as prey. He had a loaded rifle leaned up against the wall by his front door. He had forged customs documents and a pair of co-conspirators who

were begrudged of government, ill-adapted for polite society, and suffering from post-traumatic stress related sociopathic tendencies. He had a rubber Frankenstein mask. Rex had a werewolf mask. Flowers had a Creature of the Black Lagoon mask, and he also had an ice-cream truck that they'd outfitted with an industrial compressor and generator and enough gasoline to keep the truck's back compartment cold for fifty hours. They planned to fill that cold space with blood.

Ralph knew instinctively where the cricket's blind spot was. It was hopeless for that cricket. Millions of years of genetics and ancestral practice had trained Ralph to kill and the cricket to die. Crickets had been dying in hordes since the dinosaur age and spiders had been massacring them. A single cricket laid thousands of eggs in its tiny crescent of life and every single one of those crickets in every single one of those eggs died.

Ralph crept into the cricket's blind spot until he was a foot away. When he pounced, it happened faster than the human eye could follow. He was crouching, then he was atop the tiny insect, pinning it to the ground with his massive forelegs, their wiry hairs like dozens of steely talons gripping the insect. There was a very quiet *pttt* as Ralph's fangs penetrated the cricket's carapace, like the sound of a fork being stabbed into a baked potato. The cricket kicked its feet at empty air in the throes of a venomous death. Even before it was done twitching, Ralph began to suck its liquified innards from its body.

The day of the heist had arrived and nothing came to stop it. Stick sat awake through dawn and the sun rose and cast its light through the canopy of pine and spruce trees and mulberry and creosote bushes in a web of shade and light on his patio, just like any other dawn. Stick went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. On his way back to the couch he donned his brown felt jacket with the latex Frankenstein mask in the pocket. He tied on his boots and took the rifle

back to the couch with him and laid the weapon across his thighs. He took the pair of black gloves from the left pocket and stretched them over his hands. He took the mask from the other pocket, put it on, and beheld the world through the twin tunnels of that monstrous visage. The latex smelled like the chloroform he'd once used to knock out animals so that he could examine, treat, or dissect them. He waited there in that stench with the gun for Rex and Flowers to arrive. This was the day of agency, the first day of a future life in which he would charge headlong at the hard world and break it or break upon it.

Flowers's truck roared up. Stick sensed from the twin guttural sputter, one powering the engine, one the refrigeration compressor, that the arrival was that of his cohorts, but he sat still and waited for them to come in and get him. It seemed important to the ceremony of the day to sit in the gloom of his living room on the brown couch with the brown carpet amidst the bare brick walls, watching his spider lay in gluttonous stillness beside the desiccated corpse of his breakfast.

Spartacus Rex rapped at the door. "Stick," he yelled. "Time."

Ralph awoke from his post-meal stupor and pivoted his whole body to face the racket in one leap.

"Enter," said Stick.

Rex rapped again. "Stick! Time to go."

Stick got up, hefting the rifle to his shoulder, and opened the door. Rex was dressed in camouflage pants tucked into his black jackboots, a hunter's jacket, and a black t-shirt. He was poised with a fist at the level of Stick's sternum ready to knock again when Stick whisked the door open.

“Jesus Christ,” Rex said. “Take that off. Scared the hell out of me.” He pushed past Stick into the apartment, where he paced, clenching and unclenching his disproportionately large hands, like a caged animal. Ralph skittered to hide beneath the T.V. stand. “We don’t want people linking the mask with your apartment.”

Stick raked the mask off his head and put it back into his coat pocket, even though he knew it was pointless. No one remembered Stick for his face.

“Flowers is already driving me nuts,” Rex growled. “That idiot won’t stop ringing his ice-cream truck horn at kids we pass. It plays Pop-Goes-The-Weasel. Why’d we bother to paint the truck gray and cover up the window if he’s going to blow kids’ jingles all over the fucking city?”

Stick stood by the door with the long rifle at his shoulder, feeling like a guard standing at attention, listening to the rantings of a superior officer. “He’s excited,” Stick said.

“He’s a goddamned buffoon,” Rex said. “You’re going to have to help me keep him in line.”

“Done,” Stick said. There were few people Stick lost patience with. Flowers was one of them.

The two men left Stick’s apartment, mounted the stairs, and found Flowers’s truck, which now looked like a tall, slightly stocky gray van, with an odd deformity on the side where the window had been covered with sheet metal and painted over. They mounted up, Stick riding shotgun and Rex in the center.

“Sticky!” Flowers chirped at Stick, leaning across Rex to punch him jovially in the knee. “You’re one of us now!” Flowers was dressed in a droopy black sweater, black slacks, and a skull cap. His clown suit was stowed in the back.

“Don’t call me Sticky,” Stick growled at him.

Flowers giggled and pulled a cord above the driver’s seat and Pop Goes the Weasel tinkled forth from some hidden sound system.

“Goddamn you!” Rex swatted at Flowers’s shoulders. “What do I keep telling you? What?”

“No music, Flowers’,” the clown growled in a mimic of Rex’s guttural mutterings. “But, I thought, you know, we should celebrate Stick’s being with us and all.”

“No more music!” Rex yelled.

“No music, Flowers,” Stick weighed in.

“Okay! No more!” Flowers said, and swung west on Lead Avenue toward the little bulbs of volcanoes that ridged the west side of the city. They were headed for a blood and plasma donation center in the neighborhood south of the university, where impoverished students, drug addicts, and the chronically homeless sold their fluids for forty bucks a pop to fund a life that was probably barely worth living. Visualizing that building, covered with a palimpsest of gang tags, the windows grated with rusted security screens, the ragged line of the desperate and depraved trailing from the door, Stick seriously considered retrieving his rifle from behind the seat and painting the roof of Flowers’s truck with the contents of his head. After all, in the animal world only the cetaceans, the wisest of all forms of life, committed suicide.

They arrived before Stick could consider the wisdom of whales any further. Flowers swung the van into a narrow alley between the blood bank and a ramshackle house converted into a coffee shop. They pulled up next to a side door to the building, which the bank kept locked. Flowers killed the truck's engine and both he and Stick turned to Rex.

Rex took a deep breath. "Alright gentlemen," he intoned, "this is it. Remember, stick to the plan. Minimal talking. In and out. Nobody gets hurt." He stared at Flowers as he said it.

"What?" Flowers protested. "I'll stick to the plan. Don't I always stick to the plan?"

"Just stick to the plan," Rex said. "For once."

Flowers pulled his head back into his shoulders, giving himself a triple chin above his sweater. "That hurts my feelings. Of course I'll stick to the plan. If it's any of us friends you should worry about, it should be him," Flowers said, pointing across the front seat at Stick. "He's green."

Stick glared at him.

"Enough." Rex took another deep breath. "Let's do this. Masks."

The three of them pulled their masks from their pockets and stretched them over their heads.

"Alright, let's go!" Rex ordered. Flowers burst from the car like a blundering rocket, slamming the door into the wall of the blood bank. Stick stepped out more carefully, turning back to retrieve his father's rifle from behind the seat, which he slung over his shoulder. Rex had his own rifle secured to his chest with a system of black military webbing. Flowers shoved a big fat silver pistol in his waistband and groped a sawed-off shotgun from beneath the driver's seat.

Stick wondered if it always dwelled there, even as Flowers wended through residential neighborhoods at five miles per hour selling popsicles.

They left the wheelbarrows in the back of the truck. The plan was to come out the side door for them after an initial display of force, since if they brought them in right away only one of the men would be able to brandish his firearm. Flowers led the charge around the side of the low, dilapidated building, where there was a short line of prospective donors leaning against the filthy brick. Flowers leveled his shotgun at them and screeched, “Everybody kiss the ground!” in his manic falsetto. The people, a cluster of gutter punks, a haggard woman with no hair and white lips, a very old man wearing at least four jackets, all simply stared. Their heads turned from Flowers to behold Rex cradling his gun like an infant against his chest, and Stick towering. They probably thought that Frankenstein, the werewolf, and the fat Creature from the Black Lagoon armed to the teeth like a gunslinger were hallucinations, a performance art piece gone wrong, or a college prank, but surely not a serious threat.

“C’mon,” Rex said as he trotted past the line toward the entrance, “pass ‘em by. This wasn’t part of the plan!”

Stick followed closely after Rex, but Flowers, faced with such stubborn refusal to follow his orders, cocked the shotgun dramatically. “What are you, deaf, yah rubes? I said down!” At this the punks hit the dirt, the woman with the white lips slowly climbed from her feet to her knees to her stomach. The man with four coats simply let out a belly laugh.

“Ho-ho-ho!” he laughed.

“Damn it, old man. Get down on your belly!”

“Ho-ho! Ho-ho-ho!” His locks of greasy gray hair shook as he held his belly, fat with coats, and laughed.

Stick and Rex were already at the door. “Creature!” Rex yelled. “Inside! Now!”

“I’ll be back for you!” Flowers yelled at the old man, shaking his shotgun in the man’s withered and filthy face.

They burst into the donation center. To the right was a small waiting room, the dozen or so chairs full of downtrodden people. A woman with a little boy. An old couple clasping hands. A scruffy-looking kid and two girls, gutter-punks, dreadlocked white kids with thread-drizzling backpacks and sandaled feet. Others, nameless and wretched, upon whom Stick and Rex and Flowers were intent on reaping psychological harm. Directly in front of the door was a reception desk, from which a neat-looking woman in a beige sweater rose slowly to her feet and turned white as a sheet. Between the reception desk and waiting room was a doorway through which Stick saw a big room sectioned into smaller cubicles with hanging curtains.

Flowers leveled the shotgun at the waiting room full of people, drew his silver pistol and pointed it at the receptionist’s forehead. “Everybody freeze!” He screamed. “This is a stick-up!”

“B-b-b-but,” the woman stammered. “We have no money. We pay in checks.”

Flowers leaned back his scaly green head and let out a long guffaw through his befanged maw. “We’re not here for money, baby! We’re here for the blood!”

The woman’s face split into a look of absolute horror. “Oh my God. Is this a nightmare?”

“Damnit,” Rex growled, shouldering past the clown. “Knock it off.” To the woman he said, “We don’t want any trouble, lady. Just tell us where the safe is.”

“We pay in checks, like I said.” Her moist eyes were fixed on the barrel of Flowers’s gun, only inches from her forehead. “There’s no safe.”

Rex brought his fist down on the desk phone, exploding it into shards. “The fucking blood safe. Where’s the blood?”

“The back!” she squealed, covering her ears. “It’s in the back.”

“Alright!” Flowers hollered. “Here’s how this is gonna go down.” He wagged his belly back and forth between his brandished weapons, surveying the room to be sure everyone was listening. It was probably one of the only times in his life that a room full of people had taken Flowers seriously. Stick had seen people laugh at Flowers, mock Flowers, ignore Flowers, bully Flowers, even tolerate him, but never respect him as any sort of authority. “Nobody does anything stupid, and nobody gets hurt.”

“Just shut up and come with me,” Rex snarled through his werewolf face. “Frankenstein, you’re in charge of this room. Everybody lies down on the floor and keeps their hands behind their heads. No cell phones. Frankenstein sees anybody using a cell phone and he’ll get very unpleasant.”

Stick still stood just inside the door, bearing his rifle across his chest, the muzzle carefully pointed at the ceiling. He surveyed the room, the denizens of which began to spread themselves across the floor. Rex and Flowers pushed through the doorway toward the back of the building, accompanied by Flowers’s shrieked imprecations at the nurses and donors and Rex’s curt commands. The receptionist stood there still, her gaze transfixed on the point of air where the barrel of Flowers’s pistol no longer hovered, her hands over her ears.

Stick reached over the desk and gently waved his spread fingers before her eyes. She started and looked at Stick's face. Trying to make his deep voice as kind as possible, he said, "Don't worry. We'll be gone before you know it."

The woman looked at him half in terror, half in disgust. "You're a monster," she said.

Stick should have told her to be calm and lie down, but couldn't bring himself to address her. He was on the verge of quietly turning and walking out of the building, all sense of agency that had built up over the preceding weeks vanished. He could simply walk east toward where the Sandia Mountains loomed grim and grey over the city, treading through the dismal streets of until he reached the foothills, and from there taking the La Luz Trail, the Trail of Light, up into the forests of pine and slate and there to sit until the end of his days, shrouded in guilt.

As he lingered there on the threshold, he heard Flowers whoop with joy from deep within the building. The clanging of the wheelbarrows rung from the tiled floors and unclad walls as the other two men wheeled them in to collect the booty of blood. The floor, coated with bodies, rustled slightly. The blond woman stood and stared at Stick.

Then a woman's voice rang out from beyond the doorway. "We've got a problem back here," it said. When no one responded, the woman called out again. "Somebody? There's a girl bleeding back here!"

Stick stepped carefully toward the doorway, avoiding prone legs and arms. He peered through and found the woman who had been calling out. She was lying on a donation cot to the right of the doorway, clenching a generous swab of cotton in a crooked elbow and jabbing the pointer finger of her other hand across the aisle. Stick found a male phlebotomist standing there at rigid attention over another cot. On that cot, a catheter in her arm, pale as a ghost, the plastic

bag of blood hanging below her overflowing on the white tile, was a woman. She was passed out, her head on the pillow, her mouth drooping.

“Sir,” Stick said to the phlebotomist. “You’ve got to stop the bleeding.”

The phlebotomist stared at Stick, unmoving. He was in shock.

The woman’s blood trickled onto the tile. Stick reached out and shook the man by the shoulder. “Sir,” he said. “Snap out of it.”

The man didn’t move so Stick leaned his rifle against the wall. He took the woman’s arm in his fingers and pulled the catheter from her vein. A ribbon of blood uncoiled from the wound. Stick took a cotton swab from the tray beside the chair and pressed it against the pit of her elbow, her pulse rapping against his fingertips. He bent her arm at the elbow, closing it around the swab, and tied it like that with a rubber tourniquet. The phlebotomist watched him, still unmoving, as Stick lay the crooked arm down across the woman’s chest.

“Thank you,” the phlebotomist whispered.

Stick nodded and retrieved his rifle.

At that moment Flowers burst into the room. “Frankenstein! Let’s go!”

And they were gone, out the side door and into the truck.

Chapter 18

Flowers

Storm clouds clung to the mountains far to the west and lingered there through the morning. But over Stick and Alma the sky stretched in an unsullied blue. They toiled beneath the sun, stopping for speechless water breaks, and continuing on. Past mid-morning they'd come across another slain ostrich, a half-dozen spent cartridges showing that Rex had returned fire. Here and there along the path, an empty plastic bag that had once held human blood. Stick couldn't tell if Rex was throwing out spoiled blood or if the bags had punctured. But they were getting close. Stick could feel it.

The tracks kept on straight south, and at some point they must have crossed into Texas. There was no sign or marker telling them so, but they were making such excellent time, that Stick thought they certainly must be close to the state border if not over it.

The bicycle crested a rise in the terrain and Alma called a pause to drink. The desert spread low and flat before them, prickled with cholla and prickly pear and twisted spruce like the stiff, thick hair on the belly of a spider. The mountains to the west had melded into the earth, and the storm clouds hung back too, still raining their prize down on the Sacramentos. Stick had spent his entire life walking these dry plains. He'd been on fossil digs and geological expeditions. He knew how to hack the skin from the flat, fleshy leaves of cactus and suck drops of water into his mouth. He knew to dig for water in places where the earth scooped low to cup pockets of grasses. He knew the lives of things that lurked low to the earth: how to avoid them, how to mimic them, how to hunt them. He knew that a pair of solitary wings high above the

earth meant a rattlesnake or field mouse below. And he knew that a spiral of wings closer to the earth meant that something had died—or was dying.

He saw a spiral over the plains below the rise where he and Alma stood their bike. He shaded his eyes with one hand and combed the area below the mobile of vultures. Alma handed him her collapsible binoculars. He looked through and found the bright splotch of color that was Flowers. He lay face down in the dirt, his wide white back like a signal mirror for detritovores.

Stick handed the binoculars to Alma, who took a long look. “So this is the clown,” she said.

“Yes,” Stick said.

Around them the desert was silent. Not a breath of air, nor movement of an insect broke the day. “Is he dead?”

“Probably not yet,” Stick said. “The vultures would be landing.”

“Ah.” She lowered the glasses and turned to Stick. “Is he dangerous?”

“He may have a gun. I’ll go down alone.”

Alma put her hands on her hips. “Are you calling me a chicken?”

“No, no,” Stick stammered.

“Alright then. We’re partners. We’ll go down together.”

They coasted down the slope leading from the mesa to the land below. Their wheels sawed grooves into the earth, and Stick thought that thousands of years from now an archeologist might come upon these tracks and wonder what creature had left them. They covered the mile to Flowers’s prone body quickly, Alma standing on her pedals to power them forward. When they

were around fifty feet away, Stick tapped Alma on the shoulder and they slowed to a stop. Stick dismounted and motioned for Alma to wait, which to his relief she did.

Flowers was indeed still alive, crawling and grasping across the sun-scorched earth, his tongue drooping over his scabbed lips. He struggled and swam forward, as if he were honoring the desert's history as a shallow, briny sea some thousands of years in the past. Flowers looked when Stick flanked him. His eyes were pits of blue in huge, white orbs.

“Aigh!” His voice was like something skinned.

Stick blocked the clown's path. “Dehydration,” Stick said to him.

“Aigh!” Flowers screamed again, paddling against the earth for his life and not moving an inch. “Please don't,” the clown pleaded. “Please don't.”

“That's what's going to kill you,” Stick said. “Dehydration. Not me.”

“Help!” Flowers wailed.

Stick knelt. He examined Flowers's body for gunshot wounds or other signs of violence and found none.

“Kool-aide,” Flowers gasped up at Stick. He'd stopped paddling and simply lay atop his boat of a torso, palms braced against the ground so he could tilt his head up to plead with Stick.

“Oh please, don't you have some Kool-aide for your,” he ran a whitened tongue over his lips, “poor thirsty boy?”

Stick knelt. “I don't have any Kool-aide.” Stick wondered whether he shouldn't just ride on. Rex's track was perfectly visible. He didn't need any help from Flowers to follow him.

Flowers lay his painted cheek in the dirt. He closed his eyes. “No water,” he said, very softly. “We had no water and that witch murdered my poor Larry.” His breath tickled the dust on the ground where his face lay.

“Who’s Larry?” Alma asked. She’d crept up on Flowers from behind.

“My new friend Larry, the ostrich.” Flowers then lay silent so long that Stick thought he may have passed out. Stick gestured for the water bottle that Alma held. She tossed it to him. Just as he was ready to sprinkle some drops of water on the clown’s face, Flowers’s voice creaked out of him.

“Blood,” he whispered.

“What about it,” Stick said.

Flowers opened his eyes and tilted his pupils, beautiful and clear and sky blue, up at Stick. He didn’t lift his face from where it had fallen, but his lips moved.

“Rex is drinking it.”

An hour later they had Flowers sipping water and sitting in the shade of a yucca, the tallest plant for miles. Alma had rubbed ointment on his lips, and Stick had given him a good dusting off. Alma had deployed her camping stove and was heating bullion and dehydrated vegetables. Stick tacked a corner of her tarp to the yucca and secured the other side to the top of one of her tent poles, which he’d planted in the ground. The ground was so hard he’d had to dig the hole with Alma’s pocket knife. But when he was done, they had a little shade, and soon they’d have a light lunch.

“He’s gone mad,” Flowers said. “It’s like he’s become a devil or something.”

Alma doled out the broth into two bowls and a coffee cup, and the three sipped at it as Flowers talked.

“You haven’t been acting all that well yourself,” Stick said.

“Yeah,” Flowers said. “That’s true.” He hung his head. “We ran out of Capri Sun on the first day, and I thought no big deal. People can last for three days without water, and we’ll be in Mexico in four at the most. And we’re bound to run across a well or a Circle K or a friendly cowboy or something. We were making pretty good progress.” Flowers blew across the top of his bowl and then slurped up some broth.

“Yum. Well, turns out that in the desert you can die in *hours* without water. By the end of the first day I was so dizzy I thought it was a bolt of lightning that killed Rosalita—that was another of my ostrich friends—and not a rifle. After we got away from that evil witch—”

“You stole from her,” Stick said. “You kidnapped her.”

“I know,” he whispered.

“So don’t call her that.”

“You’re right.” Flowers cleared his throat and regarded the bowl of broth in his hand. “I don’t even deserve this broth. It’s delicious and it’s the only thing I’ve eaten in days, but you should take it away.”

Stick kept expecting Alma to butt in, but she just sat drinking the clown in with her eyes, as if he were some exotic species she’d stumbled upon.

“Eat it,” Stick said.

“I don’t deserve it,” Flowers said and took a timid sip. “You know, I don’t know what got into me. I know I’m not the best person who ever lived. Life is hard for us, Stick. You know that. It’s hard being the fat loser. I’ve had to do everything I could to just get by.”

Stick sighed. “I know.”

“But this.” He shook his head. “The stealing. The kidnapping. The ostriches. I guess we got carried away, dreaming so much about that scrapyard.” He drank down the rest of his broth and wiped a sleeve across his face. “Anyway, then Rex started drinking the blood.”

“That is sick,” Alma said with a mesmerized look on her face.

“Yeah,” Flowers said. “I mean stealing it is one thing. Very bad. But drinking it? Rex said I should do it, too, that it was the only way we’d make it through the desert. But—no way. I’m not drinking blood. It was like the more of it he drank, the crazier he got. Last night the vampire bats were all over him. I mean, there was a cloud. I slept a few yards away and only a few bit me. But him, it was like they knew what he’d been drinking.

“And then he left me. That rancher, when she shot Larry right out from under me, he just rode the rest of the ostriches off into the desert. I ran after him, but, well...” Flowers seemed to run out of steam. He drooped his bowl to the ground and his shoulders slumped.

“Are you sorry?” Alma asked.

“Yes. Very sorry.” He raised his head and smiled at Alma. “And thankful that you rescued me. Without you, I’d be dead.”

Alma smiled back. “You’re not as bad as Stick said you were.”

“Thanks!” Flowers said.

Alma patted him on the shoulder and walked back to her bicycle, where she stood fiddling with something, her back to Stick.

“You’ll be alright if we leave you here?” Stick asked.

“Yep. I’ll just sit in the shade for a while.”

Stick joined Alma, who slid Chuck’s mobile phone into her pocket. “Who were you calling?” Stick asked.

“No one.” Alma batted her eyelashes.

“Come on,” Stick said. “What were you doing with the phone then?”

Alma grinned at him. “Shall we go?” she asked.

“Fine,” Stick said. “But if you’re calling someone, I think I have the right to know.”

“I was only texting,” she said. Then she jumped on the front seat and fit her feet in the pedal straps, forcing Stick to follow suit.

They left Flowers sitting beneath the tarp with a bottle of water, some dried fruit and nuts, and a promise that they’d be back. He stood and waved to them as they mounted up and rode into the afternoon heat.

Chapter 19

The Flood

Patti LeBeau was waiting for them a few miles further. She stood her horse on a little hillock bristling with grasses around the base. She had her rifle planted on her hip. Far beyond her profile, a line of green trees broke the brown of the desert all around them. It was the Rio Grande, the same river they left behind in Albuquerque. Beyond it, Mexico awaited.

They rode to the bottom of her hill and stopped. She stared off vaguely the way they'd come, as if she were expecting someone to follow them.

"You find the clown?" she asked.

"Yes," Stick said.

"He's lucky I didn't kill 'im." Her horse fidgeted. "That's always been the penalty for rustlers. Old days, my great-grandpa would've strung 'im up in a tree. Recent times," she shrugged. "Things have become more lax." She finally looked down to where Stick stood twenty or so feet away. "You didn't kill him did you?"

"We don't kill people," Alma said.

The woman shrugged again.

It was late afternoon. Stick reckoned they were ten miles from the strip of green. An hour's ride. Rex was probably already gone, in Mexico with his herd of ostriches and his cartful of blood. Sun-burnt, red-toothed, filthy.

"Is that the river?" Stick asked the woman, even though he already knew it was.

She nodded, resettled the rifle's butt on her hip. "No way he'll get those birds to cross. No way in hell. And the cart. It'll sink like a stone. Figured I had time to wait for you two to catch me up so we could come on him together. He's not a bad shot."

"My name's John Stick," Stick said.

"Patti LeBeau." She shifted her crow-footed gaze to Alma. "Pleased to meet you both."

"Alma Analeticia Rodriguez de la Posta."

"Well, let's go see what kind of a mess he's made of the crossing." LeBeau turned her horse and cantered down the hill. Alma and Stick caught her up a few yards beyond, following the horsewoman around brush that grew high and in dense clumps that lapped at the horse's chest as he forded them. Alma's shoelaces became tangled in weeds and hung with brambles and burrs. The air hummed with the sawing of grasshoppers, and songbirds twittered ahead. Stick thought he heard a distant motor, and prayed it was an airplane and not a truck or ATV that would happen upon them. The river lay invisible, dug beneath the surface of the surrounding land from years of erosion. The line of trees that grew along the top of the gorge curved gently north to Stick's right, and gently south to his left, mirroring the curve of the river.

When they drew near the line of trees, Patti LeBeau dismounted and secured her horse's reins to a bush. Stick and Alma kicked down their stands and joined her.

"Leave the rifle here," Stick said to LeBeau. "I want to try to talk him down peacefully."

Patti shook her head. "There's no peaceful way with this one. He sees me, he'll start shooting."

"Then stay here. I'll go out and see if I can find him. He might not even be here."

LeBeau pointed down at the two-toed tracks in the dirt and raised an eyebrow at him.

“He might already be in Mexico,” Stick said.

“Tell you what,” LeBeau said. “I’ll stay in the tree line, out of sight. But I’ll cover you in case of trouble. If you can talk him into surrendering, so be it. I’ll take him peacefully. But if he tries to get away, I’m doing what has to be done.”

“What if he runs away, but leaves the birds?” Stick asked.

She shook her head.

“You would shoot a man over stolen ostriches?” Alma said.

“That’s the west. We defend our property. He already owes me for two head.”

“The ones you shot,” Stick said.

“No use arguing,” LeBeau said. “I’m here to take the man to jail or do whatever else’s necessary. Frankly, I don’t see why you’re disagreeing with me, seeing how he treated you.”

“It’s complicated,” Alma said. “They are very old friends.”

“My friends don’t tie me up. But have it your way. You go out and talk him into surrendering. I’ll have you covered from up here.” And she walked off into the trees.

Alma took Stick’s elbow in her small hand. “Good luck,” she said. “If that crazy lady shoots at you I’ll kick her in the elbow.”

“Thank you,” Stick said. He felt himself choking up a little. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“We’re friends,” Alma said. “Now get down there.”

Stick patted her on the shoulder. She took his hand, squeezed it, and pushed him away toward the river. He used that momentum to carry him through the line of trees and shrubs to where the land crumbled away into a vast gorge that stretched east and west. The Rio Grande lay

low and brown at the bottom, almost identical to the section that he knew in Albuquerque. A quarter mile to the east and slightly south, a man with gray hair stood up to his waist several yards out in the dull waters, ferrying what looked to be a red and yellow rubber raft across the river. Scattered on the near bank several ostriches scavenged for food. The cart lay overturned on the beach.

Stick slid down the slope like a snowboarder, a skill he'd learned with the man who didn't even look up from where he struggled forward through the water, clinging to his raft. Stick reached the bottom, his shoes filled with scree from the dirt slope, and jogged along the bank toward Rex. One of the ostriches raised its head from rooting in the mud by the river bank and made a deep thrumming noise in the back of its throat.

Rex turned. They froze there for a moment, Stick and Rex, pursuer and pursued. Stick didn't know which had stopped him, the warning call of the threatened ostrich, or the look of absolute surprise from his old friend.

Stick moved closer to the water's edge, figuring he could wade into the river if one of the birds charged him. But he knew that they'd most likely flee anyway, which they did, the others taking the closest bird's warning and loping downstream as a pack. Rex fumbled behind his back and pulled forth Flowers's big fat silver pistol, his other hand clinging to the raft lashed together from hundreds of bags of plasma and blood. Each bag came prefabricated with a hole through the top and Rex had wound a length of twine through all of them and was using it to float them across the waters in a huge, sloppy flotilla. Rex pointed the pistol at Stick and a rivulet of water dribbled from the barrel. The armpit of his shirt was cut out, probably so it wouldn't rub on his spider bite.

“Better put that gun down unless you plan to club me with it,” Stick yelled across the river. He looked over his shoulder and searched the tree-line for LeBeau, who he knew had a bead on Rex at that very moment. “Our friend the ostrich rancher has her sights on you.”

Rex showed his teeth. They were stained pink in the crooks.

Stick took a step into the shallows, the cool river lapping into his shoes. “Better drop it, Rex. I’m not the one who poses the threat. And you know it won’t shoot, anyway.”

“You.” Rex tried to shift his body further across the lazy current and Stick saw that he was mired in unseen mud below. “How the hell did you—you sonnofabitch bastard—you brought that cold-blooded hag with you—you—you.” The barrel dipped as Rex lost his footing and his body submerged to the armpits. He righted himself. “How the fuck did you find me?”

“I had help,” Stick said.

Rex sneered. “I should have left the clown with you. Guy’s worse than a deadweight.”

Stick stepped into the water until it reached his calves. His feet sunk into the muddy bottom and pulling each one free for another step was like walking in wet cement. “Give it up,” he said. “LeBeau will put a bullet through your head.”

“Who the—is that the ostrich woman? Is that who helped you?”

Alma emerged from the trees and peered down at them from the ledge above. “No, the person who helped me is right there.” Stick pointed and Alma waved.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m almost there. Do you see?” he waved the pistol at the far shore. “Tell the ostrich woman she can have her damn animals back. And you can have your damn girlfriend’s blood back. My own damn sister. You can have her, too.”

“You’re not going to make it.” Stick sunk deeper into the mud of the river bottom. “You know how this river gets. You’ll be hip-deep in mud by the middle.”

“I’ll swim. It’s only a few yards.” Rex tried to edge further out in the river, but was fastened to the spot where he stood.

“You’re already stuck.” Stick swatted at a mosquito that buzzed in his ear. Swarms of mosquitoes rose up from the surface of the river, hanging like a fog around the two men.

A deep sound rumbled in the distance, like thunder rolling across the ground.

Rex was looking up over Stick’s shoulder. He’d heard it, too. “Is that an engine?”

It didn’t sound like an engine. It was too big, too deep. But then the slams of several car doors echoed from just beyond the lip of the canyon. Voices called out. “Over here!” Alma shouted, turning away from the river and waving her arms.

Rex was struggling further into the river. He’d stuck the gun back in his pants and had submerged that arm to try to free his legs from the mud. The water lapped high at his chest, yet he’d made no progress. The water had risen to Stick’s knees. The center of the river had changed from placid brown to slow eddies and gentle curls of current.

Several figures exploded from the foliage at the top of the gorge. Chuck with his cowboy hat and dark glasses. Marika in a backwards baseball cap and overalls. A cluster of Cry’s feminist housemates and at the center of them, supported on both sides, Cry herself. Her black hair curled beneath her ears, the scars covering her pale face glowed red. Behind the screen of women Flowers’s smiling face bobbed.

“We’re here to rescue you!” Chuck shouted. Alma sprung on him like a bobcat, grabbing him around the neck and squeezing.

Cry stared down, and Stick realized it wasn't at him. Rex looked back. His grizzled chin quivered and he lifted his hand from the water and ran it over his matted hair. Stick no longer saw his best friend, always bossy and confident. He saw a thin man not over five and a half feet tall with the wrinkling at his eyes and cheeks and the swollen nose of a much older man. A man with crooked and darkened teeth, from years of being too poor to get them cleaned. A man who surrounded himself with people he felt superior to, like Flowers, or people he was jealous of, like Stick. The small and weak allying himself with his exact opposite. Stick almost wanted to chuckle at the notion of his friend envying anything about his body.

Cry and Rex stared at each other. The people around them seemed frozen. Stick couldn't tell whether Cry would scream at her brother, weep for him, or simply turn and walk away. Her face was an impassive mask, betrayed only by her scar tissue, which flushed when she was upset.

Finally she spoke. "Spartacus." Her fragile voice echoed across the gorge. "Come on back in."

It was as if she'd fired a starting gun. Rex surged forward again, the raft dangling in the current, his arm splashing as he managed to raise a leg and wade a foot farther across the water. Stick leapt in after him, stepping high above the muck and plunging his feet down into the water, waving his hands at the swarms of midges, mosquitoes, horseflies the size of popcorn.

"No!" Rex shouted. "Stay away from me, Stick!"

Stick was an arm's length away when the water in front of Rex exploded. Rex reared back and Stick grabbed him by the scruff of his collar.

"That was a warning shot." LeBeau's voice sailed down from an invisible spot in the brush.

“You really did me this time,” Rex said over his shoulder at Stick. “You really boxed me in.”

“C’mon,” Stick said. “We’re going back.”

“This is it,” Rex said. “Say goodbye. No more best friends after this. No way.”

Stick hauled at Rex’s neck and Rex neither resisted nor helped. Trying to drag him back toward the shore was like uprooting a small tree. “You’ve got to help me,” Stick grunted. He was hauling away at his friend when the ostriches loped upstream from where they’d flocked when Stick arrived. They sped past and continued up the river.

Stick looked downstream just in time to see the monster step from the brush on the northern bank of the gorge fifty yards distant. It was the size of a mountain lion and scaled. It had the huge, pupil-less eyes of a Roswell alien. A crest of spines ran down its back. It had a wide jaw, powerful shoulders, and hindquarters that tapered to a lizard’s tail.

Stick froze, clenching Rex’s jacket in both hands. The beast sprang down the slope of the gorge and stood by the riverside, eyeing the pair of struggling men. Rex had spotted it too, and his eyes started out of his head below each gray eyebrow. A hush had overtaken the bank above, and in the periphery of his eye Stick saw that they, too, had seen it.

Alma was the one to name it. “The *chupacabras*.” Stick could barely detect her voice over the thrumming thunder coming from the northwest, which grew louder as they stood.

The *chupacabras* was exhibiting typical predator behavior. It was watching Rex and Stick to see if they’d run. If they did, they were prey. “Don’t run,” Stick told Rex. “Whatever you do.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” Rex whispered. “I’m stuck.”

The *chupacabras* took a few cautious steps toward them, lowering its body into a slink. It had vents below each side of its head like the heat detection ducts of a snake. It edged forward, tasting the air with a gray tongue, until it was only ten yards from them.

“I wish your lady friend would shoot it,” Rex whispered.

The rumbling from the northeast grew suddenly louder, almost drowning out Rex’s voice. It was coming from upriver. It wasn’t thunder or a car engine. Stick remembered the dark clouds lingering over the Sacramento Mountains, that they drained into the Rio Grande. Stick, a son of the desert, a place of famine and monsoon, should have known exactly what he had been hearing as soon as that low voice spoke across the desert a half an hour before, and definitely as soon as the water gently began to rise around his friend’s chest.

Stick turned as the wave rounded a bend in the river, a froth of white and brown five feet high that washed a tide of deadwood and plant debris before it. Stick planted his feet and gripped Rex against his chest. He leaned forward toward the momentum of the oncoming waters. The faces lining the gorge’s rim yelled down to him, but their voices were mute beneath the roar of the flood. He looked downstream in time to catch the beast’s several bounds toward them, and the pounce that brought it down squarely on the raft of blood Rex still clung to.

Blood and water erupted around them. The *chupacabras* thrashed in the moorings of twine and plastic, taking a clutch of bags in its jaws and bursting them. The current tore at Stick’s legs and rushed around his stomach. Leaves and water-logged twigs amassed at his chest. He held Rex in the crook of his arm like a football, the other arm thrust straight forward as if he were fighting a strong wind.

After the first wave, the current eased a little. The beast and the raft disappeared, carried away by the flood. Patti was already down the gorge's slope, extending a long tree limb out across the water, which had risen by a full two feet. Stick grabbed the branch, and trudged for the side, his legs yanked by the river, Rex's weight in his arm like a comatose child. He reached the bank as Alma and Chuck and Marika slid down the slope. They pulled him out and patted him on the back. Flowers cheered from above. Chuck and Patti took Rex from Stick's care, dried him with a blanket, and slapped handcuffs on him. Stick looked for Cry, found her staring down at Rex, who sat down on the rock Chuck guided him to, docile as a lamb, mute, his eyes fixed on his manacled hands.

It was past twilight. The sun was gone, but its blush still lingered to the west. A few stars had blinked open on the eastern edge of night. In that moment between night and day, Alma grabbed Stick around the waist and squeezed him.

"This is a beautiful place," she said. Around them the land was mountain and desert, shrubs and bare sand, reptiles and songbirds, night and day, the river a meridian that held the polarities of the world together.

"Yes it is." Stick hugged her back. "Now I know why you were doing all that emailing and text messaging."

Alma grinned. "I was helping."

Stick sighed. "I'm going to have to go to jail now."

"Yes," Alma agreed. "You probably are."

"I hope this was worth it for you." Something had been freed inside him and he said, "I'll miss you." He couldn't imagine saying those words to anyone else he'd ever met—he'd been too

afraid, his relationship with them too lopsided or dishonest or repressed. But with Alma they came right out and he meant them.

“I’ll miss you, too, tall friend. You still have to come visit me in Mexico.”

Stick smiled down at her. “We almost made it.” But he was glad that this wasn’t the way he first visited that nation, his ancestral homeland, the southern neighbor of his state, and the country of his new friend.

Chapter 20

Uncle John

The low sun threw the shadow of Stick and his horse far out onto the desert plains. The shade of every bush, cactus, fencepost, and hill took on a stretched quality in the late afternoon tableau. A herd of ostriches dipped and snaked their necks in their corral. Tufts of their feathers skimmed across the dirt as the wind picked up, and a little blond girl in a straw hat and miniature cowboy boots shuffled after the bigger ones and put them in a burlap sack. Stick smiled at her and she grinned back.

“Want a ride back to the house?” Stick asked.

The girl giggled. “But it’s right there!” She pointed at the ranch house, only a hundred feet away, nestled among the corral, the stables, the grain silo. Beyond them were the halls of the vast coop where the ostriches spent their nights.

Stick held his hand up to shade his eyes and pretended to try to find the house off in the distance. “That’s pretty far,” he said.

The girl twisted the neck of the sack shut and held her arms up. He slid a hand beneath one armpit and hoisted her onto the saddle in front of him.

“Giddiup!” she yodeled and Stick gently flicked the reins and clicked his teeth. The horse walked them to the house and as he was lowering the girl to the ground again, a car engine wound up the road from the hills to the east. “Who’s that?” the girl asked.

Stick shook his head.

“My moms are home already, right?”

“Yes,” he said. “You go on in. I’ll see who it is.”

Stick sat on his horse and waited for the car. A cloud of dust rose up from beyond the hilltop and soon a van emerged from around the bend. It was painted with a collage of women: Medusa, the Succubus, Marie Curie holding a test tube, the bride of Frankenstein, La Llorona, Susan B. Anthony with her hair in a bun. It was the van of the feminist co-op. Cry sat behind the wheel. She pulled the van up a few feet from Stick and killed the engine. Her hair was swept into a ponytail that swept her shoulders as she stepped from the vehicle. Her face was flushed and freckled from sun. Stick wondered if she were back to gardening.

Stick swung from the horse and stood holding the reins and stroking her muzzle.

“That’s the biggest horse I’ve ever seen,” Cry said. Her voice still held a twinge of static that spoke of her old injuries.

Stick wished those weren’t the first words from her mouth. “Out here I forget about all that,” Stick said. “Being big.”

“I’m sorry,” Cry said.

Stick shrugged. “It helps being big when you work on a ranch.”

“I’m sure,” she said. She looked around, taking in the house, the corral of animals with their big glassy eyes and fluffy bodies. “It looks like you’ve found your place.”

Stick felt the sun on his arms, the cool tease of the wind. He breathed in the air rich with the scent of earth, animal, blossoming plant. Little Reggie peeped through the window at him. He waved at her and she ducked down beneath the window sill.

“Alma told me where you were,” Cry said. “She texted me. That woman.” Cry shook her head and smiled. “She made me promise not to hurt you if I came here.”

Stick chuckled. "I'm lucky. Even from Mexico, she watches out for me."

Stick stroked the down beneath the horse's neck. Cry looked like she wanted to touch her, but didn't. Inside the house, Patti's wife came and peeled Reggie away from the window. Patti herself paused to give Cry a level stare before she shut the curtains.

"You're surrounded by protective women," Cry said.

"Guess I learned that from you." Stick shrugged. "It's a good thing, living here."

"Do you stay in the house?"

"I have an apartment in the attic."

Cry nodded. "I just came from seeing my brother." She kicked at a pine cone that lay in the dirt between them.

"How is he?" Stick asked.

"He's," she said and shrugged. "He's Rex."

"How much longer does he have?"

"A year, probably. Then he's up for parole." Rex was in prison, where he'd been sentenced to eight years. He'd already been inside for two. Flowers had been sentenced to ten years for assaulting a police officer. Stick, because he had no criminal record, spent six months in jail and was released. He'd never work for the government again. But Patti and her wife had come to visit him every week, and offered him work to speed his parole. Stick hadn't been to see Rex in prison, though he'd visited Flowers.

"It's nice of you to visit him," Stick said. "I'm sure it means a lot."

Cry nodded, still toeing the pinecone. “It’s been good for both of us. I was avoiding him all those years because I thought he knew about my father. Turns out, he didn’t.” She shrugged. “It’s been healing, talking to him.”

Stick nodded. “That’s good,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Listen. I just wanted to come and find you and make sure that you were okay.”

“I’m well,” Stick said.

“You’re the kindest man I’ve ever met. I mean that.”

“Thank you,” Stick said.

“Nice people don’t get the thanks they deserve sometimes.”

“No,” Stick said. “Maybe they don’t.”

The ostriches in the corral behind them crunched in the gravel and shook their feathers. The front door of the house opened and Reggie stepped out, holding her Playstation Portable in one hand. “Uncle John,” Reggie said. “My moms told me to say it’s almost supper time.”

Cry shrugged. “I guess you have to go in.”

Stick nodded. “Guess so. Thanks for visiting.”

Watching her plod back to the van took a long time. Finally, she stepped back up into it and closed the door. She waved once at him through the dusty windshield, looking small and sad behind the wheel. Then she drove back down and around the hillside.

When the sound of the van’s engine had disappeared, Stick led his horse to the stable. He removed her bridle and saddle, made sure her trough had plenty of water, and fed her an apple. The other horses snuffled at him, and he patted each one on the muzzle as he passed. A rich smell

floated from the kitchen. Reggie's giggle arched out through an open window. Upstairs in Stick's spacious attic, Ralph surely stalked a spider or cricket across the wooden floorboards. Stick entered the house through the side door. Inside, the kitchen was bright and warm.

It was nighttime.